

DARK OUT

*A prescient dystopian fictional novel by an aspiring
author. A “food for thought” novel.*

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One

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The home sat on the highest peak of Russian Hill, set well back from the sidewalk. Its pristine white façade was trimmed with imported Italian marble and furnished in pure luxury. Those who happened to stroll by could not help being captivated by the understated, yet hypnotizing luxury that seemed to drip from every detail, like hot wax from a candle. Nor could they ignore the dizzying display of the wealth and power wielded by the home's occupants.

Beyond the home's grand entrance, inside the foyer and just above the round mahogany table, hung a large Waterford Crystal chandelier. Beyond it sat a breathtaking grand staircase. Zachary Kendall had never seen a horseshoe shaped staircase with wide marble stairs that ran up both sides of the room. But then, he did not know anyone with a home big enough to have one. Nor did he know anyone wealthy enough. Transfixed, his eyes followed the stairs to the Italian hand-painted vase that had been filled with the most beautiful flower arrangement he had ever seen. The vase, the size of a small child, had a bouquet of flowers that cascaded over its lip and brought out the colors of the fresco on its face.

Zachary promised himself that one day he would have a grandiose home of his own, one that would make this one look like a *favela*—whatever the cost. The abject poverty of his childhood in Santa Rosa, CA, a small city forty miles north of San Francisco, honed Zachary's *absolute need* to achieve wealth and notoriety. Every aspect of the home screamed exquisite and expensive. So exquisite and so expensive that it would not surprise him to learn that the sole purpose of the home was to intimidate the guests, to remind them that though they were wealthy, the owner of *this* home was wealthier.

A thought struck him: rich, powerful, intimidating, and absolutely unapologetic, the home represented the man he fully intended to become.

Lila felt Zachary shiver and assumed it had to do with his nerves. After all, he had never before found himself in a room bursting with the country's rich and powerful.

"You look like a billion bucks," she said, as her heart-shaped red lips brushed the top of his and sent a delightful tingle through his body.

Zachary stood poised with a greedy gleam in his eyes. Contrary to what Lila might have thought, he was not intimidated. He was fascinated.

"Senator. Mr. Kendall," the butler said, with a polite bow of the head as he entered the foyer. "Please, follow me."

Lila Duarte, the most powerful person in the Senate, placed her arm through the crook of his. Zachary straightened his back and walked, chest proud, eyes forward as he tried to disguise his annoyance about having been addressed in second position. It is temporary, he reminded himself. Temporary.

"Let's make them gawk," Lila said, with striking confidence.

From their first meeting, Lila's natural confidence had captivated Zachary. Even now, amid being thrown into a room full of lepers, she remained poised. Zachary tucked the observation into a mental pocket. It was those slight, barely perceptible exhibitions of control and power that he absolutely had to master and incorporate into his persona.

Zachary placed his free hand on her arm and found reassurance in knowing that in *his* arm was the most powerful person in Congress, that she was *his* date, and *his* path to power.

The butler walked two steps ahead of them, gloved hands at his sides and palms pressed to his legs. They stopped before a closed set of French doors. As soon as the doors swung open, the butler moved aside and in a robust voice that carried the room, announced, "May I present our guest of honor, Senator Lila Duarte." The conversation in the room died down as the crowd turned to face them. Polite applause filled the room as Lila brought her palms together and gave a few grateful bows. "And her guest, Mr. Zachary Kendall." Zachary took a deep breath and thought of the day that he would be the guest of honor. After that, he effortlessly exuded an air of arrogance, which was aided

by his expensive, custom-tailored tuxedo that cost him two months of earnings, this in addition to his pair of shoes that cost him the better portion of a week's earnings.

"Sir." A butler held a tray with two champagne flutes for Zachary to take. Taking both glasses, he held one in each hand and followed Lila through the crowd. Zachary felt like Lila's personal butler. It's temporary, he reminded himself, all the while marveling over how easily he could slip into this world of wealth and power, of private access and exquisite things. He felt intoxicated by the perfume of power and it somehow reinforced his belief that he had been born to the wrong parents.

Zachary enjoyed the envious glances he received from the other suitors in the room, as well as from some of the women. The crowd parted as they moved through the room, much like the Red Sea parted for Moses. Feeling empowered off the residual fumes Lila's presence emitted, he placed a confident hand on the small of her back and guided her from one conversation to the next, not really saying much, but always observing.

Every second of Lila's time was sought after by campaign donors, so it pleased her to see that Zachary was more than capable fending for himself. As she secretly observed Zachary govern his ego amidst the abrasive personalities closing in around them, the corners of Lila's lips lifted with approval.

Zachary, the man with no wealth or power of his own, was largely ignored by the other guests. He had initially grown hot around the collar, but intuition told him to take a deep breath, fall back, and observe the game of power being played.

Lila worked the crowd. It never mattered who approached her; whether she knew them or not, her equanimity remained steadfast. Regardless of status, Lila looked every person in the eye as they spoke. She effortlessly conveyed a genuine interest in everything they said. Zachary couldn't decide whether she was an excellent pretender, or whether she was actually intrigued by them. After all, everyone in the room was a constituent, albeit from the top three percent of her constituency, most of whom had unlimited resources to give to her campaign.

The dizzying merry-go-round of solicitors made it difficult for Zachary to maintain a mental record of the persons who spoke with Lila, and the subject matter of their conversations. One minute, Lila would be in the middle of a conversation, and the next she was pulled away to join another. Like dust sweepers, her aides followed close behind

and took a written record of who she spoke to and the subject matter. At some point someone, probably a handler, would ascertain whether that person merited a one-on-one follow-up with the Senator. Zachary figured that decision would almost entirely be based on the individual's net worth, in tandem with the likelihood of their future contributions to her campaign.

Standing just at the periphery, Zachary occasionally allowed himself to admire Lila, her beauty and strong confidence—he had grown enamored with her. But mostly, he focused his attention on those around her, picking up subtleties in their mannerisms and commanding postures. Dressed in tastefully understated, yet fabulously expensive attire, they moved around the room with that false sense of greatness that disproportionately afflicts the exorbitantly wealthy. How he longed to be one of them. No. He longed to be greater than *all* of them.

Zachary did not know how, but he knew that he would sit in the seat of power. He knew that he would pull the strings of the politicians who whored themselves out to the highest bidder.

A smile formed on his lips just as Lila glanced his way. She returned the smile, and he nodded. As soon as she turned back to her conversation, his mind went back to scheming. Attractive, tall, slim, fit, with great legs—Lila looked incredible in her custom-tailored red dress. He had to remind himself not to lose sight of the fact that Lila was the key to his future. He would leverage her position and status to carve his own path to great wealth, and to the subsequent power that wealth arbitrarily begets. His date, the most powerful woman in the room, would be his conduit to those that held the power to grant him the lucrative government contracts he needed to build his empire. She would be his springboard to the stratosphere so few ever had the privilege of reaching—grossly exorbitant wealth.

Elizabeth, the owner of the home, made her entrance.

To Zachary, a man who spends a large portion of his time scheming to contrive financially beneficial relationships, it seemed as if the air itself had been sucked out of the room when the homely, yet exquisitely dressed, woman walked into the room. Elizabeth had diamonds dripping from her wrists, fingers, and neck. There was nothing subtle about her wealth. She had it, and she flaunted it. Her physical beauty was an

entirely different story. In fact, she had none. The woman had an impoverished bosom, no real waistline that could be discerned from where he stood, and her skin was pasty. The only attributes Zachary found attractive were her shock blue eyes and the lush, golden curls that cascaded down from her up-do.

Like a missile trained on a target, Zachary's eyes locked onto Elizabeth. An intoxicating aura of command and power emanated from the woman. As she approached, he noted that everything about her screamed wealth and power, heaping amounts of it. Her essence was like a magnet in a room full of ferromagnetic scraps. Next to her, Lila was a nobody.

Zachary's eyes moved with Elizabeth as his mind schemed. With the wealth and power Elizabeth had at her disposal, he would leapfrog over his current expectations. In his way of thinking, Elizabeth was essentially Lila, but with a multiplier.

"That's Elizabeth walking towards us," Lila said, then placed her arm through his as if to prove ownership. Lila's hackles rose, though she hid it well from Zachary; such female emotions were almost impossible to hide from other women. "Elizabeth is the sole heiress to the Gray family trillion-dollar fortune. Try not to fall in love with her," Lila said, only half-joking. Every man she knew conflated love with wealth when it came to Elizabeth.

Zachary felt Lila's warm breath on his neck as she whispered over his shoulder and gave him goosebumps. Later, he would ask himself whether the goosebumps had been caused by Lila's warm breath, or from having learned that Elizabeth was the sole heiress to a trillion-dollar estate.

"Well, aren't you the handsome couple?" Elizabeth poked at Lila when she allowed her eyes to linger over Zachary.

"Thank you." Lila used a well-rehearsed, politically correct cadence, tinged ever so slightly with a tad of passive-aggressiveness; it had been subtle enough for Elizabeth, a very important campaign donor, to miss. Had any other woman dared to salivate over Zachary as Elizabeth had, Lila would have dug her feline claws into her eyes.

"Oh, Lila. Really. He is a bit young for you, isn't he?" Elizabeth hissed, as she walked them over to a special group of people that had paid a premium for a photo-op with the Senator. "I can take him off your hands, if you'd like." Elizabeth was not a fool. A woman

of her wealth and stature always got what she wanted. “Besides, don’t I get something for my trouble?” Elizabeth said the last bit under her breath, still Lila’s ears caught it.

It amused Zachary, the chauvinist that he was, that such an unattractive woman could exude such confidence. The experience only cemented a belief he held: the exorbitantly wealthy thrived in an atmosphere of incredible misperceptions of themselves. Money, regardless of appearance or intelligence, was the golden hall pass and he *would* have it for himself.

“Don’t you always?” Lila scoffed, with a bit more aggression than she had intended, because she realized that Zachary knew he was the object of her under-the-cuff cat fight with Elizabeth. The smug look on his face did not sit well with her.

“It is a two-way street, Lila. Do not forget that. It is why I throw this little fundraiser for you.”

“I get you judges that will side with you and your business interests, don’t I? I make sure your concerns are always heard and addressed, don’t I?” Lila would make certain Elizabeth understood that Zachary was not part of what she was buying.

“And for that I am grateful.” She said, and led them into a large study with dark wood trimmed walls and bookshelves filled with first edition leather bound books from floor to ceiling. Zachary thought Elizabeth came off as more entitled than grateful. And, he realized he liked that about her. Elizabeth never had to be grateful for anything, because she could buy it—whatever *it* was. “You have forty minutes in this room,” Elizabeth whispered at Lila.

Quickly, Zachary roughly counted ten guests scattered about the room. The table in the center of the room held an exquisite bottle of Scotch whiskey, along with crystal tumblers on a silver platter. Next to the table stood what Zachary surmised to be a couple still climbing the power ladder. Judging from a few exteriorities of their appearance, Zachary pegged the couple’s wealth at about just over the halfway mark—wealthy enough to afford the cost of attending the fundraiser, a Tesla, and perhaps a second home in Cape Cod, but not much more than that.

“Jonathan and Mira,” Elizabeth cooed, clearly in control of the evening’s introductions. “Let me introduce you to Senator Lila Duarte.” As if an automatic switch

were popped on, their perfect white smiles appeared in tandem, with a false genuineness that neither side was buying.

Zachary marveled at the blatancy of the usury relationship.

On the ride home, Lila would explain that it was usually those that were still trying to establish themselves in their social circles that opted for the photo. New money. She likened it to the concept of “proof of life”, but that it served as proof of power that they could display on their mantle or office for others to witness. What Zachary would learn that night from that room was that perception was everything when one was in the process of power accumulation.

One of the parties that approached Lila that night was a man named Wilhem Zeiman, Zalt Industries’ CEO. An arrogant type with too much money and power, everything Zachary wanted from life. Zachary knew he was a big fish from the way Lila’s red lips framed her pearly, white teeth. Every tooth in her perfect smile showed.

Unaccustomed to feeling jealousy over a woman, even Lila, Zachary summoned his anger and swore that he would make a bag lady out of Wilhem. Wilhem dismissed Zachary’s presence as though he were a gnat and led Lila off by her elbow. Before his fury could take over, Elizabeth sidled herself beside him.

“Don’t worry, he always crashes and burns with her... she likes a certain type.” Elizabeth eyed Zachary as though he were a piece of meat, the type of meat both she and Lila preferred.

Miraculously, Zachary found that he suddenly didn’t mind that Wilhelm had swooped Lila off for a moment.

“And what about you? What is your type?”

As blatant as a slap on the face, Elizabeth appraised every square inch of his body and said, “I like them tall, but not too tall, with golden blond hair and piercing blue eyes.” She was clearly describing him. “I especially like men who are not intimidated by strong... powerful women.” Her right index finger ran a straight line from his chest, down to his belt buckle. “Very powerful women.”

In the car, on the ride home, Lila closed the privacy glass separating them and the driver. She took a sip of her water and turned to face Zachary.

After a few seconds of silent observation, Lila cut through the awkwardness and got to the point. “Did I sense something between you and Elizabeth?”

The question surprised him and Zachary froze for a split second. Lila notoriously treated the men in her life as excursions. Jealously had been the last thing he had expected from her.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Lila was not being ridiculous. She had acted on female intuition, and the facts. Zachary was a well-known power chaser. It was a quality she’d been made well aware of from the start. His claim to have accidentally “bumped” into her at the café, when he spilled her iced coffee on her blouse, had been a ploy to connect with her. It had been no surprise when he just “happened to know” her favorite French restaurant. A restaurant, according to the dossier her team put together on him, he could barely afford. Their whole encounter had been a carefully orchestrated event, so that he could gain access to the most powerful person in Congress. It had only motivated him more that she chaired the Appropriations Committee. It was par for the course for Lila with men, except that she’d actually taken a keen interest in Zachary. Such a keen interest that she had allowed herself to fall in love with him.

“Really, you think that I’m being ridiculous? She’s your age, single, and probably one of the most powerful women you now know, if not the most powerful person, period.” When he didn’t answer, she warned, “Be careful. Elizabeth is not as easy to handle as you might think. She comes with all the psychological insecurities and disorders that that much wealth can inspire.” And just like that she knew that their relationship would never be the same.

Two

April, 2028.

As he drove past another abandoned farm, Gary's mind began to wander. He saw a parallel between the fallen sun-scorched trees and the swaths of rigor mortis-stiffened bodies being found in homes.

Pulling the sweaty T-shirt away from his skin, his eyes darted to the truck's dashboard — 4:10a.m., then to the temperature gauge, 115 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat never allowed for a cooling reprieve. Instinctively, Gary rolled up the window and flipped on the air conditioner. As soon as the cool air left the vent and touched his skin, Gary felt his body relax.

No rain had fallen in over two years and the trees were dying. It was all the greedy sun's fault for hoarding the sky and leeching the moisture from every living thing. The sun's searing touch had become lethal, so much so that only deserts and the creatures that live in them could survive in such a pernicious environment. Fruit trees lay where they fell, as desiccant winds licked the last drops of moisture from their fibers, and the once lush fruit farms were turned into tree graveyards.

The sound of fine sand and dirt being kicked at his truck made Gary look out of his driver's side window. A cold chill ran like ice water through his veins when he saw the stars in the horizon disappear. A storm approached! Clouds had darkened the distant star-spangled sky and began a charge in his direction, like a herd of wildebeests charging across the Serengeti plains. The road, flanked by miles of abandoned orchards, would provide no shelter against the storm. Without an alternative, Gary buckled down and prepared to sit it out in his truck. He hoped that when the storm passed, he would still be there.

In the blink of an eye, the storm muscled its way into the sky above Gary, where it seemed to fitfully intensify. It took only minutes for the wind to whip the sand around like an airborne scouring pad. Hard blowing wind rushed the dark clouds across the sky and kicked every loose object in its wake into flight. The last sand storm had removed chunks of paint from Gary's truck, and buried his tires. As loathe as he was to have to dig out his tires, it *would* be preferable over being carried off and flung into the dark sky by powerful winds.

Gary pulled off onto the side of the road and braced himself. *Thud!* Jerking his head, he turned towards his driver side window. Hard, large balls of hail began to bludgeon his truck, they struck so hard that they bounced a good foot into the air after impact. Before long, a carpet of hail formed as far as the eye could see. The bluish-white hail was beautiful to look at, but Gary knew that the angry sun would soon return to melt it all away.

Watch, wait, and wince were Gary's only options each time a particularly strong gust of wind grabbed onto his truck to rattle it. Gale winds shook and shoved at the truck until it turned a full 180 degrees. After fourteen minutes of white knuckling the steering wheel—each minute felt like its own lifetime—the storm mercifully passed. Left behind were fresh divots on his pick-up truck's body, farms with wind-tossed dead trees, and Gary's frayed nerves. At least he was alive.

As quickly as the storm came, the sky cleared and Gary forced himself to get moving before he got caught out when the sun rose.

Sun exposure had become a health risk. The U.S. Government affirmed the risks when it declared a national emergency that urged citizens to stay home during peak daylight hours. Aggressive skin cancers had spiked. Algae blooms had become a threat to fresh and salt water bodies, which threatened drinking water and seafood supplies. Dead trees, parched cracked soil, shuttered windows and empty streets during high noon hours, all prescient cues of the future that lay ahead.

Tired of his mind constantly masticating the same, tough, sinewed meat that were his thoughts on the state of the earth, Gary turned on the radio to distract himself. A female news anchor's voice poured out of the only working speaker in his truck, and gave notice that the bodies of those not claimed would be given burial in one of several mass graves.

The mass graves in Bakersfield were only three months old and already filled near to capacity. Truckloads of corpses arrived daily and were bulldozed into the large communal grave. The hole in the Earth was said to have been dug big enough to swallow two side-by-side SF Giant's baseball stadiums. Seeing the massive grave in person would be a shocking reality check for anyone, including Gary. Astonishingly, bodies were being found daily and no one was coming forward to claim their dead. There were tens of thousands of unclaimed dead people across the state. Millions across the nation.

People were neglecting their dead because they could not afford the burial costs. Another consequence of poverty—no dignified burial.

In the space of his mind, the mass grave and the dead trees became one and the same. Long scenes of endlessly intertwined and gnarled tree branches easily transformed into human limbs. Twigs morphed into knotted fingers. Branches became ungodly bent and twisted limbs, with a split here and a snap there. And the landscape, which was once so rich in minerals that it fed America, had metamorphosed into the grotesque canvas of death and despair that depicted the smiting of humankind.

"Moving on to other news...." Gary's thoughts drifted back to the news anchor's melancholic delivery of the most recent tragedy. "A bus full of senior citizens travelling from Los Angeles to Sacramento became overheated and broke down along Highway 99 yesterday, during high noon. All passengers succumbed to the extreme heat before help could arrive."

Gary shook his head, reached forward, and shut off the radio. The whole point of turning on the radio had been to stop thinking about all of the despair.

Life on Earth had evolved to revolve around sun avoidance during peak daylight hours. It forced Gary to be out of bed and on the road before 4:00a.m. on errand days. That morning's errand was Ivan's Deli. Every errand away from a place of shelter had to get done early, with enough time to spare in case of delays from a breakdown or a wicked storm, or both.

After a few tries, the truck's tires finally spun and took hold enough to climb out of the piles of dirt and sand the storm had built around them. Before he could get comfortable, the right front tire plunged in and out of a deep pothole on the asphalt road. The unexpected jolt jarred Gary and further frayed his nerves. Instinctively, his eyes went

to the rear-view mirror, but there were too many potholes to identify the culprit. Many city roads had become so rough that driving on them sometimes brought back memories of the roads he'd driven on in Third World countries.

The drive into town was slow and bumpy, but Gary never minded it. He enjoyed the way Reedley's small downtown always opened before him. The way the doldrums of architecturally deprived iterations of the same house design replaced the farms. Shoulder to shoulder, the homes seemed to hustle into view on their teeny-tiny lots, just so they could show off their shoddy construction and lack of curb appeal.

The roads in town had as many potholes as those in the countryside. Gary's truck often juttied, plunged and jumped as it travelled over the roads, much like a small boat plunged and rocked through rough waters. Slow and steady ensured less damage to his truck's precious suspension.

Eeriness seemed to have settled into Reedley much earlier than usual. Abandoned and forgotten homes regularly passed their days in a lonely silence, with not a wisp of life to be seen moving on a porch or through a window. But the occupied homes, their shutters and blinds were normally kept open through the night, until early morning. Perhaps the windstorm had sent the occupants to their basements. Or, had it been the particularly early rising heat? Gary recalled that Michelle had mentioned something about Reedley's power grid crashing. If that were the case, it would explain the prematurely shuttered windows.

Gary hoped the power would be brought back up before the peak heat hours arrived. If not, there would be many more fresh corpses to bulldoze into those mass graves.

Nocturnal living had become the community's response to the crippling daily heat. Life's routine had to be turned on its head to avoid contact with the sun during peak hours. Inside the homes, behind the walls and shuttered windows of Reedley, and around the country, most inhabitants were settling in for their "nightly" rest, if any could rest in the sweltering heat. Only fools and those who had no alternative would dare to venture out during peak daylight hours.

Something needed to be done about Reedley's power grid, but given how despondent Government's response had become with each successive crisis, Gary wouldn't hold out hope. Like most Americans, Gary learned to expect the worst. And to accept it. Government's coffers had been drained. Infrastructure had become nothing more than a

liability, in every sense of the word. Even the billionaires had become so fed up with Government's inadequacies that they began to leave the country at the rate of ticks jumping off a decomposing carcass.

Gary's thoughts migrated to Entelo, a gentle man who happened to be a billionaire, and the CEO and President of Un Animas. Un Animas had been a consortium that took government contracts and worked to quietly thread Argentinian interests into the economies of other Latin America countries. Their work for their respective governments had crossed their paths, which resulted in a beneficial mutual relationship for both.

10 Years ago.

Gary arrived in Argentina, the Patagonia region. He'd been invited there under the guise of a surprise birthday party Entelo had planned for his fifteen-year-old son. Gary's first instinct had been to decline the invitation—direct commercial flights to that part of the South American country were non-existent, making an already long trip too long. Fortunately, Entelo insisted he accept and sent a private jet for Gary. The flight plan took Gary from SFO International Airport to the private runways on Entelo's private hacienda, near El Calafate.

The night before the surprise birthday party for Chase, Entelo's son, would change the way Gary saw himself. It had begun with him seated on one side of the roasting pit, across from Entelo, while a couple of gauchos worked to spit a suckling: Farmhands, with their leathered hands and faces and wide-brimmed boleros, expertly worked the thick, pink skin and ran a metal spit through its hind end. Gary watched as they proceeded to shove it through the flayed cavity, then out of the mouth. The entire effort took them a matter of minutes. The manual spit was big and sturdy. Over the years, Gary bore witness to a multitude of beasts roasted slowly on that very spit. The flayed animal's legs sticking straight out as they went round, above the glowing wood embers. But it was the smell of the wood-fire barbequed meat, infused with dripping animal fat that sizzled until it burned to nothing, that lingered in Gary's memory.

"We're barreling towards the tipping point," Entelo interrupted Gary's concentration on the rotating animal with his incoherent statement. Entelo achieved his goal, he had Gary's attention.

Something about Entelo, about the distant look in his eyes as he watched Leo baste the suckling, that bade Gary to give Entelo his full attention.

A short, squat type named Ignacio took his turn and cranked the handle. Sweat darkened the lower part of his bolero's crown and part of the brim. The tank top he wore, sagged from sweat and clung to his loose flesh as he worked.

"Tipping point?" As was usual, Entelo had confused Gary with his sudden transition in the conversation. The conversation had abruptly hopscotched from the light subject of the day's events—Entelo's son, Chase—to "barreling towards a tipping point."

Tossing a piece of wood into the fire, Entelo said, "Just making sure you were paying attention," and gave a boyish grin. "In a matter of years, people will be forced to become nocturnal. For us... here... that time is only a handful of years away."

Entelo was referring to the abnormally high temperatures that plagued the world. The Sun's touch had become a universal source of concern that even Global Warming denialists could no longer deny. Crop failures and famine had become a recurring reality for developed nations. Skyrocketing skin cancer and solar retinopathy rates had humanity on high alert. Those who resided in countries like Argentina and Australia, with significantly higher disease rates due to their proximity to the gaping hole in the ozone, remained indoors during daylight hours. South Africa's Cape Town had recently announced a substantial investment in a city-sized underground activity center. It would be built with restaurants and shops for residents to safely spend their days.

A young man, wearing a burgundy headband around his neck to catch the sweat, approached Gary with a bottle of Malbec and two wine glasses. Behind him, flecks of embers popped and shot into the midnight air as the flames danced wildly with the suckling's dripping fat.

"Gracias," Gary said, taking a wine glass from the Gaucho and holding it out for him to fill. "Malbec, por favor."

"Malbec," the Gaucho repeated as he filled Gary's glass. Next, he moved to where Entelo sat.

"What are you saying, Entelo?"

"I'm telling you what you already know. That people all around the world will have one of two choices in the future. They will either become nocturnal, or they will live out

their lives belowground,” Entelo prognosticated with unwavering conviction. “My Argentina, and the other southern hemisphere countries, will be the first forced into making the choice.” Leaning forward, Entelo held Gary’s eyes with his and warned, “Don’t be a fool and make the mistake of thinking the rest of the world will be spared.”

Understanding and reflection softened Gary’s face. Meanwhile, Entelo took the opportunity to study every crease and eye movement Gary made. When Entelo was satisfied that he had received the response he’d hoped for, he smiled. “I am glad I wasn’t wrong about you, Gary. That look in your eyes tells me you get it! So, my friend, I brought you here to share our choice with you. To inspire you to look inward, and not to government. You... we have the resources; we only need the will to...”

Gary listened, unable to resist the intrigue. Entelo spoke and took a glass of wine from the Gaucho and slogged the Malbec with every passionate word he spoke.

“Well?” Entelo had an expectant look on his face.

“I agree with you. Everything you have said is true. But can it truly be accomplished off the radar?” Before Entelo could answer, Gary gave him a curious grin and asked, “Why do you look as if you’ve gotten away with something you shouldn’t have?”

Entelo emptied his wine glass and placed it on a small round table covered with toughened cowhide. He had an easy way about him, even for a multi-billionaire. He stood and said, “Not something I have done, my friend. Something I am building.” He signaled for Gary to follow with a tilt of the head.

Gary left his wine glass next to Entelo’s and followed. For a brief moment, a lighter side of Entelo’s personality had emerged, a side that harkened back to their early friendship. As they walked, Gary noticed that Entelo walked with a slight limp, but he decided it was not the time to ask about it. After all, they had both aged six years since their first meeting.

“Come, my friend. I will show you *our* choice, *our* way forward as a sovereign people from the Argentine Government, and from the powers of the multinationals.”

Intrigue worked Gary’s mind to guess where Entelo was going. Needing to know everything, Gary capitulated to his curiosity. “Where are we going?”

Smiling that devilish, self-satisfied grin he sometimes did, Entelo shook his head with mock disapproval and said, “Patience, my friend. A twenty-minute jaunt will soon reveal

what I have been working on for the last two years. You will be impressed with what we have managed to accomplish behind the back of my corrosive, corrupt government.” Entelo never hid his disdain for his government from Gary, which he found ironic, since it was private government military contracts that made Entelo so exorbitantly wealthy.

The helicopter landed in an area that a decade ago had been covered with evergreens and conifers. Fires had since destroyed everything, and the lack of rain discouraged regrowth. A one-hour hike through a short, narrow canyon opened to a basin with an excavation site. There he saw what he would later fondly recall as *the initial footprint of the world’s first underground sovereign country*. It was Entelo’s vision come to life. A self-contained, sovereign nation, within the borders of his beloved Argentina, protected by the Andean Mountain range.

“I’m building this for my family, and for my people. For when the world implodes.” Entelo spoke with solemnity as he led them into a small, rectangular structure on wheels that served as the architectural and engineering office. As they walked inside, a blessed cool air shot at them. Gary felt his body sigh with relief. Patagonian heat had become a sweltering convection oven because of the constant hot winds.

“What is it, exactly?” Gary asked, as they stopped before the table with a large marked-up map splayed across it. An ice water pitcher and crystal glasses had been set out for them. Gary took the pitcher and poured a glass of water for Entelo, then helped himself.

“Thank you.” Entelo said, without missing a beat as he picked up where he had left off. “I bought the land from here to here from corrupt politicians.” Taking a pencil from the cup that was sitting on the upper right corner of the map, he added, “Here and here will be part of my continually evolving Nest.” There was another Nest being excavated near the base of the Andes Mountains that would be strictly for military soldiers and their families.

In Entelo’s mind, the military Nest would function as a backup, in case one failed for some unforeseen reason. Entelo always factored in a contingency, a precaution he learned to build in to his methodology in order to survive and succeed in his industry—Private Military Contractor.

Every year after that visit, Gary went back to Patagonia to see his dear friend and share his own progress with the land acquisition, and then the excavation of Lazador’s Nest in

California's Central Valley. Their visits stopped six years after Gary's introduction to the Nest concept, when Entelo sent a message bidding him farewell. As promised, he and his Nest community fell off the grid and became their own sovereign nation.

Gary's only regret was that he never saw Entelo's completed and fully occupied Nest.

Distracted by his thoughts during the drive, Gary suddenly realized that he had arrived at his destination. Ivan's Deli. Unsurprisingly, the parking lot remained empty. Gary pulled into the first parking spot, nearest to the front door, and threw the truck's gears into park. The shop's windows had a perennial coat of dust that made it difficult for anyone to see whether anyone was behind the counter.

Was that Ivan? Or was it his employee, Sam? Sam was a scraggly high school kid that reminded Gary of a squirrel when he ate. The kid always bit off tiny bites of food, bunched his mouth, and chewed his bites in rapid succession.

Ivan's dilapidated deli no longer attracted new customers. The façade had fallen victim to the harshness of the natural elements: the paint was peeling, the windows were permanently fogged, and the gutter that once ran up the left side of the building now sat on its side, rusted to death and with holes eaten through it. Several gusting windstorms had come through the area and used their hot, dry breath to whip around the sand and dirt until they could sand the paint off buildings. The same windstorms were rumored to have skinned a person alive.

Between the dangers of solar radiation and unpredictable weather, people hesitated to venture far from home for prolonged intervals of time. Compounding that was the high unemployment rate across the whole of the Central Valley. In short, few people could afford to pull into Ivan's Deli parking lot.

Gary walked the four steps to the deli's door and heard the loud grumble of the emergency power generators, working tirelessly around the corner. Constant rolling blackouts and power outages made it essential for all business owners to invest in a power generator. Without one, business owners risked having to shutter their shops for some portion of the business day, if not the whole day.

Gary pulled the door towards him and the bell tied to the handle jingled. The small-framed man behind the counter paused what he was doing to glance up.

“Hey, Gary.” Ivan’s smile always reached the corners of his eyes when he saw Gary. Ivan was in the process of pulling a piece of saran wrap from the thick roll against the wall.

“Ivan,” Gary reciprocated, with a nod. When he reached the counter, he saw Ivan taking the hunk of pastrami to wrap it and stopped him right there. “That’s on my list, you may as well save the plastic.” He took the list from his front pocket and placed it on the glass case: 1 lb. Black Forest ham; 5 lbs. pastrami; 5 lbs. turkey; 3 lbs. corned beef; 2 lbs. prosciutto; 1 lb. sliced pepper jack cheese; and 2 lbs. provolone.

“Aren’t you all supposed to be going vegan?”

Gary’s eyebrows arched. “I have a few people who are having a little difficulty. That is what this is... to help wean them off.” He tapped the list. “And aren’t you supposed to be throwing some fresh paint on this place? It is looking pretty rundown.”

Ivan looked over the list, glanced back and forth between it and the remaining slabs of meat in his refrigerator case, and shook his head. Exhaustion tugged on Ivan’s eyelids, but Gary did not mention it. Most in their community still struggled with the nocturnal schedule and Ivan was no different.

Ivan shook his head to say, never. “Why should I bother? The windstorms have their way and chip away the paint, every time.” His attention remained on Gary’s list. “I can get most of it for you, except for the corned beef. Ran out of it a month ago and they haven’t delivered my last order.” Ivan wiped his hands on his not-so-white white apron and got to work slicing the pastrami. “It’s like customer service no longer matters to the suppliers.” Ivan shook his head. “If you don’t live in one of the wealthy big cities, like San Francisco or Los Angeles, you don’t really matter anymore.”

“They still have jobs there,” Gary stated the well-known fact. He and Ivan always talked politics and economics on his weekly deli runs. “Don’t get your hopes up, but it sounds like those Artificial Respirators are actually going into prototype phase.” Everyone had heard the rumors about Kenneth Montes and the ARs.

Ivan let out a long, approving whistle. “I pray they work and rescue us from our own demise.”

“The next hurdle will be government funding... if they actually work.” If Kenneth were not so paranoid about secrecy, Gary would have reached out to see if he could be of

any assistance with lobbying government, or using some of his old contacts. As it was, Gary could not imagine how Kenneth was coping with the leak about the existence of the prototypes. Kenneth had to be as wound tight as a coil over it.

“Oh.” Ivan said, not liking the odds of government funding materializing for the ARs. Everyone knew the government was barreling towards insolvency. “Well, thank goodness for Lazador’s Nest, right?” Ivan said, as he wiped his hands on his apron and straightened out his collar, then ironed his pants with his hands.

One thing about Ivan that Gary found curious was his appearance. The guy always looked as if he had just woken up from a rough night of sleep and left his home in as is condition. His hair bordered on bedhead and his clothes were always disheveled. Ivan strongly favored the traditional chef’s black and white checkered pants, which he regularly paired with exuberantly colored button-down shirts, printed in elaborate patterns. Like his clothes, so went his personality: eclectic and quirky. But when it came to his business acumen and intellectual conversation, Ivan was sharp.

“Humanity’s derelict state was once so preventable, and then it became lamentable.” Many of Ivan’s good friends had lost their homes to foreclosure, or lost so much that they had been reduced to rummaging in trashcans for food scraps. In fact, it would be fair to say that his deli had more beggars than actual paying customers. “So, how close are you?” Ivan asked, keeping his back turned to Gary as he worked with the meat slicer.

Ivan asked Gary the same question, since Michelle’s institution of the requirement to transition to veganism for all soon to be Lazador Nest residents.

“I am down to eating meat once a week. You?”

Ivan would be part of the first group of residents welcomed into the Nest, which should be nearing the final stage of construction.

Embarrassed, Ivan grinned and said, “I’m only going to say that I’m working on it.”

Gary accepted that and let the subject drop. The conversion from carnivore to vegan would not be optional once residents were underground. Lazador scientists would not waste energy or resources to produce cloned meat. So, if individuals did not take initiative to change their diet before moving in, they would be forced into a brute conversion.

Gary looked to see what else Ivan had in his refrigerated case. “You don’t have much of anything right now, do you?”

“Nope. You are pretty much going to wipe me out.” Ivan looked around the case, picking up and putting down different hunks of meat to give Gary a better look at his options. There was salami, head cheese, roast beef, and a few sausages. “Most of the meat is going to San Francisco and San Jose, because they can pay a higher price... and they have actual paying customers.” He spoke as he reached deeper into the case for a hunk of meat, then paused and looked back to Gary. “Did I tell you that they raised the prices on me by three hundred percent!? And after that, they had the audacity to tell me that they were increasing the cost to deliver out here.” Ivan shook his head from the bottled-up frustration he had been holding in. “Really! I am going bankrupt as it is. And to make things worse, my customers are moving to the cities!” He had moved on to slicing the turkey as he spoke. “Can’t say I blame them for leaving our Podunk, jobless town, but their departure is only making it worse for everyone who’s stuck here.” Gary hated hearing it, but he knew that people had to make their own way. “Hey,” Ivan unexpectedly changed the topic of conversation. He did that every so often, lapsing into butterfly moments, another reason Gary found him so interesting. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but last night an unmarked bus, one of them double-decker buses, pulled into Los Banos and dropped off a load of people who had been evicted from their homes... San Franciscans.”

Los Banos was a small town, like Reedley, that few people knew existed. Most of those who knew of it, knew it from a sign they passed during the drive between the Bay Area and Los Angeles. Some of the state’s poorest people, possibly the whole country, hailed from there. Their entire economy relied on the collapsed farming industry.

“Why Los Banos?” Gary shook his head. He had not heard about the busload, but he’d heard about the evictions. Demand for living space in the cities had outpaced inventory at unprecedented levels. Naturally, the premium price every square foot fetched had driven many property owners to find creative legal, and illegal, means to undermine the terms of the tenant agreements.

“The landscape in our community is so different that I barely recognize it anymore. Have you seen how many abandoned homes we are up to? Entire neighborhoods are void of people!” Life had become a lamentable reality. “We’re living through *the* point in time, right after the scale tipped. And it tipped against us, the average folks.” Ivan’s

disenchanted spirit expressed what Gary and most Americans knew: everyone was officially on their own. Without resources.

“Which is why, those who can must go to the cities. It is where the jobs are.”

Ivan shook his head because he hated that Gary was right. “Heartbreaking. Heartbreaking to see so many of our friends and family leave. I worry they are going to go and then come back even more destroyed. If you ask me, there aren’t enough jobs for everyone who is going. Soon they’re going to shutter the city gates to keep more people from flooding in.”

Gary was surprised that hadn’t already happened. He figured city governments would soon find a way to keep people out, because homelessness had ballooned and the city streets were said to be clogged with them.

“The situation is unprecedented, by every measurable metric. The homeless problem alone sounds untenable.”

Ivan rested his right arm on the glass case, in his hand he held a lump of meat that looked suspiciously like ham. “I have seen the chaos of the city. The streets are so full of homeless people that you can’t drive... hell, you can barely walk without stepping on a sleeping body.”

Ivan’s two boys were some of those who had chosen the city over their small, deteriorating town. Before they left, they had tried in vain to get their mother and father to join them, but Ivan stood firm. He had no desire to start over in the overcrowded and overpriced city of San Francisco.

“Have you heard from the boys?”

Ivan gave a solemn head shake and said, “Not a peep. They are too busy with their new *hotshot* lives.”

“They’re in a good place.” Gary knew that Ivan’s boys would do well. Ivan’s wealthy, and somewhat politically powerful, sister had taken them in and placed them with Solvent, the world’s largest bank and controller of the dominant global crypto currency—Solvent Crypto.

“Their place is with their parents.” Ivan’s disaffection showed when he manhandled the hunk of meat he had been wrapping. Then, he nearly threw it back into the case, but thought better of it. Instead, he said, “Since my sister didn’t take the time to have children

of her own, she's taken mine," with a haughtiness that was unusual for his usually calm demeanor.

Gary was well aware of the acrimony between Ivan and his sister, though he'd never been privy to the cause. "That's not fair and you know it. The boys just showed up at her doorstep. She could not just turn her back on them!" Life underground had not found appeal with everyone. It had been a big ask, especially of two young men in their prime.

"I wish she would have. I don't trust the multinationals... and I don't trust the direction the country has moved in. I worry that our children will have no future to strive towards once their fields are automated. Then what will happen to them?" Ivan hated that there would be no way to contact his children once they went below ground. It was killing his wife to know that, but even she agreed that they would never survive a new life in San Francisco. Unwrapping another hunk of meat to slice, Ivan reasoned out loud, "This, what we're talking about, is a poor man's problem. The rich and their kids don't have a problem finding a job... because they don't even need one. And, running out of money is just not a concern they would have." Ivan glanced over the mountain of sliced ham before him and began wrapping it in butcher paper. His small hands worked feverishly, moving along from task to task: slice the meat, stack it, place it on paper, wrap it, tape it, label it, throw it onto the stack of packages and start on the next one.

Ivan always managed to surprise Gary. He thought of himself as lower class, sometimes even poor. He completely discounted the fact that his own two sons had benefited from their familial relationship. Because their aunt was married to one of Solvent's executives, his sons were entitled to coveted jobs in finance. Ivan's boys were part of a select few who emigrated to The City in search of a better future, and had it handed to them.

"It's certainly a stark, uphill battle for most," Gary said. He was glad his girls would not have to worry about it. They would not go to The City. Instead, they would join his Nest, a four-hundred-acre underground city, just like Entelo's. Lazador would become a self-sustaining, secret, sovereign nation. A small, but inclusive nation, for the people and by the people.

"See this here beautiful prosciutto I'm about to slice up for you? In a few years it will come from a cloned lump of meat in a lab." He took Gary's disapproving expression as

doubt and said, “It must. The planet has become much too hot for farms. How many more *indoor* farms do you actually think they will build? They’re too expensive, and now that the meat cloning technology is developed, it’s only a matter of time until production is scaled up.” Ivan was done with the meat. He stacked it up on the counter and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed across his chest. There were no other customers in his store, anyways. “On the bright side, no more madcow... bird flu... swine flu, or any other new novel food virus. Diseased food will be a thing of the past.”

“As will be the remaining farming jobs. It will take fewer lab coats to produce what is produced today by the farmers, no more need for vast swaths of land, grain suppliers, etc. They will urbanize the process. They’re already building the cloning labs in the cities where only the people who can afford meat will live.”

Ivan groaned. His distributor had recently told him as much. “The world as we know it has come to an end.”

“Boy, is that the truth.” Gary released an exasperated breath and shook his head. “And still, no Base Minimum Income for the people.” There was no way to pay for the BMI. Without a working population, the government coffers had no way of being replenished with tax dollars.

“That’s because we both know the tax-dodging multinationals, the ones hoarding all the chips at the table, will never agree to fund one.” Ivan said, his frustration carried forth in his cadence.

“Never,” Gary agreed. Lazador’s Nest was bitter sweet for Gary. Sweet that his daughters and their children would never have to worry about such things. Bitter that the option could not be offered to everyone.

Government efforts to build solar shelters for citizens had repeatedly failed because funding couldn’t be found. Corporations and entrepreneurs had thus far not entered the foray of building solar safe cities because they saw no profit in it. Only a handful of socially-conscious entrepreneurs, such as Kenneth Montes, had been actively working to rescue humanity from its own mess. The Artificial Respirators showed great promise. Unfortunately, Kenneth Montes and others like him, lacked the funding to take their inventions from concept to development.

Silence settled the conversation as they each pondered the plight of humanity. There had been so many warnings and opportunities to change course!

Unlike prior economic downturns, the one their fellow Americans found themselves in appeared to have no bottom. Each successive generation would have it worse than the last. Artificial Intelligence and Global Warming disrupted markets and forced change that caused irreversible friction for the human labor force. Worse, corporate “AI efficiency” had already spread beyond the U.S. border and begun to stem the flow of emigrant labor to once human-reliant labor markets. The labor displacement brought on by autonomous cars alone should have been a wakeup call for politicians and consumers. When long-haul drivers disappeared, the remote restaurants they frequented shuttered their doors. In turn, grocery stores, dry cleaners, hair salons, and other businesses that serviced the closed restaurants and their employees also lost an income stream. The losses continue to spread, like a ripple through poorer and poorer communities.

“On a cheerful note, when are you going to let us move into that Nest? Ling and I are past ready.”

“Soon, my friend. Very soon,” Gary said, more than ready himself.

Ivan felt beyond privileged that Gary had shared his Nest’s blue prints with him. The focus on clean and efficient technology that the Nest would run on had been what first captured his imagination. And the R&D engineering lab’s prominence had only reinforced his belief that Lazador’s Nest, though underground, would be a modern *country* with all the amenities. He could not say the same about the world he would be leaving behind, which was why his sons’ move to San Francisco worried him so much. In his gut, he knew they would be worse off.

“Good, because I am most certainly not moving to The City.” Ivan then let out a flat whistle and said, “I’d be poorer there than I am here.”

“We all would,” Gary concurred. “And quite possibly in more ways than we can even imagine today.”

Ivan nodded to show that he suspected as much. “Hey.” Another butterfly moment. The sudden perked-up animation gave his excitement away.

“What’s up?” Gary leaned in.

Ivan's brow lowered and his expression turned serious. "You know Jack, over on Harder Road?"

Gary thought for a moment, then nodded. "I heard he filed for bankruptcy. I tried to call him, but I haven't been able to reach him."

The bell on the deli's door had not rung again since Gary entered, yet Ivan felt it would be wrong to say the word out loud, so he went to a whisper. "Suicide." He placed his elbows on the counter and leaned forward, so that his chin was halfway over the counter. "A few days ago. His wife, Martha," Ivan was not sure whether Gary had met Martha before, so he threw in her name, just in case, "was visiting family down in LA with their two boys. When she got back home, she... found him. Martha called Ling that night... they are staying with us, for now." With uncertainty, he added, "Left destitute. Gary, she can't support the household by herself, and Jack's life insurance is barely enough to pay for the funeral arrangements." Now timorous, Ivan lowered his eyes and mumbled, "Gary, Ling and I told her about the Nest. We invited her to come live there when it is ready." He searched Gary's face for disapproval and found it, but it had only remained for a split second. Gary quickly swallowed it down and maintained a stoic expression. "I am sorry, Gary. Martha is like family. Ling and I just wanted to give her hope. She is desperate. They have lost it all." Hoping to find a way to soften the frown on Gary's brow, he added, "Don't worry, she won't tell anyone. She has no one to tell. Something happened that she is not sharing with us. Something very private. Anyway, her family has basically slammed the door in her face. Besides, she knows Marco and Yesenia, their boys are friends. She will fit right in."

After a few minutes of silent contemplation, Gary relented. "It's fine." It certainly was not a problem. They absolutely needed more children to come into the Nest for there to be a future generation, but it had been prohibited for future residents to share information about the Nest. If the wrong person overheard, it would jeopardize the entire endeavor.

"Well, the Nest could use more children. But next time, run it by me first. The fewer people that know about our Nest's existence, the better the likelihood that we can remain a sovereign people."

The greatest threat to Lazador's existence would not come from the government. No. If trouble came, it would come from the multinationals, who viewed everything outside

of their realm of control as potential competition. Multinationals, like Zalt and Solvent, hadn't amassed their wealth and power by allowing competitors to germinate and sprout around them; if they couldn't buy the competition, they initiated a price war. But what if the competitor was not offering a tangible product, rather a way of life? Until they knew the answer, Lazador's existence had to remain a closely guarded secret.

Gary should not need to get into the mud on the details. Everyone understood the need for secrecy.

Ivan nodded sheepishly. The rules had been made very clear: No talking about the Nest. Not with anyone. Period. And he knew he had broken it. He also knew that this would be Gary's only, albeit polite, warning.

"Thanks." Ivan's relief was palpable as he busied himself with bagging up the items. "It's all here." He held the bag out over the counter. "We will never mention it again. And that includes Martha." As he closed the refrigerator door, he became animated with a new thought. "What about all of those people that were dumped in Los Banos?" Well, it wasn't quite a new thought, but it *was* a subject change. "There may be electricians and construction workers in there. These people were evicted and dumped, which means that they do not have any family to take them in, which means they would be great for us."

Gary nodded. He'd already thought to have his daughter, Michelle, go and see if there were any in the group whose skills might be of value to Lazador. Bringing new residents into Lazador was like walking a tightrope, a compromise that had to be walked between limited resources and the need for residents with the skills required to ensure the Nest's survival: doctors, carpenters, engineers, etc.

A sanguine Gary considered the empty shelves to the left of the refrigerated meat case. Once upon a time, those shelves had been stocked with varieties of bread. Those days were long gone. Gary noted that only one-half of one of the six shelves had anything on it: four loaves of white bread made from a genetically engineered wheat that never molded.

"Ivan, I wish we could invite everyone to join us in our Nest community, but you already know that we have finite resources." Gary pulled his eyes from the stale bread and shook his head. "With that said, I *will* ask Michelle and Clarence to head out to Los Banos and see if we can't bring in some of those people."

They may be able to make room for a handful of people, but no more.

Often, Ivan wondered what he would have done if he hadn't met Gary and been invited into Lazador's Nest. Would he have moved to San Francisco with his sons and fought the fight to survive? It killed him inside that he could not share his good fortune with others, but he understood the constraints Gary faced.

"They're keeping them in the old gymnasium, the one inside of the Boys and Girls Club." Ivan pushed Gary's list back towards him. "You should frame this as a memento of life before the Nest."

Gary took the list and put it in his back pocket. A nostalgic gleam shone in Gary's eyes. "Thanks," he said. "I just might do that. And right beside it I'll put a picture of your deli."

It seemed unlikely to both men that there would ever be a time in the future where they would look back at their lives above ground with any fondness. Their lives had become so challenging that even basic life routines felt like hardships.

"Not to be ungrateful, but I don't think that I need to keep a memento of this place," Ivan said, feeling the dejection of failure. "Now, if you get a chance, I hope you go to Los Banos and look around for yourself. It's just awful what's become—" He didn't bother to finish the sentence. When he and Ling went to Los Banos to pick up Martha and her boys, they saw that the town had been looted clean of food and water. He could not imagine how the new arrivals would survive.

"I'd wager Los Banos is getting paid per head dumped," Gary said, shaking his head.

Small farming towns, like Los Banos, needed new revenue streams. Few jobs remained, which forced citizens to abandon their homes and head for the big cities. Desertions resulted in loss of property and sales taxes collected. Desperate for revenue, many small communities used what resources they still had to turn the problem of people dumping into a business. For the right fee, cities like San Francisco, could buy the right to dump their homeless in Los Banos. Homelessness activists could not complain, because small farming towns had numerous vacant homes needing residents, and the small towns needed revenue—clearly a win-win situation.

Both Gary and Ivan believed that the homeless placement scheme would amount to a farce. At its earliest stage, Gary had described it as "nothing short of putting lipstick on a

pig.” Ivan had agreed. They understood well how the multinationals worked: Maximum profit drove every decision. Consequently, at some point in the not-so-distant future, the big cities, who were by all accounts owned by the multinationals, would inevitably default on their stipends to small towns. After that, it would be anyone’s guess as to how the homeless would survive. If they survived at all.

Wallet in hand, Gary placed the cash on the counter. “It is awful about Jack. Tell Martha and the kids that I am sorry for their loss.”

“Will do,” Ivan said, wondering why he bothered to collect a payment from Gary anymore, since Gary always paid in U.S. dollars, which fewer and fewer institutions accepted anymore. Suddenly, everyone wanted Solvent Crypto. “Same time next week?”

“You can count on it!” Gary paused at the door. “When’s your next shipment come in?”

“Well, last I was told was that it would be here tomorrow.” It was obvious by his body language that Ivan doubted the delivery would be made.

With a nod, Gary said, “In that case, I may come back tomorrow to see what else you got.”

“Do, if you are in town. Either way, I’ll leave a message with Michelle.”

As he drove through the deserted downtown, thoughts of Jack’s suicide injected Gary with unexpected melancholy. He hadn’t known Jack well, but the community had known him as a kind and generous man. Gary had often heard that Jack was one of those people who didn’t have much, yet gave away what little he had.

At the street with the home with the gargantuan dead walnut tree in the front yard, the one that wore a sun-worn tire-swing like an ugly earring, Gary turned left and the town of Reedley appeared in his rear-view mirror. Ahead, a rural landscape of dying farms unfurled.

Most of the farms he drove past had become worthless splats of land where nothing grew anymore. Soil nutrient depletion and lack of rain had doomed farming, but the increasing automation and urbanization of the industry would soon put the final nail in the coffin.

The sun’s hot fingers began to paw at Gary’s thighs. He felt a distinct stinging touch that lingered from the sun that reached through the truck’s windshield. He cursed and

glanced over the truck's hood where the refracted heat swayed like a Hawaiian hula dancer.

The bag of sandwich meat on the passenger-side seat caught his attention, so he grabbed it and held it away from direct sunlight. Preoccupied with where to put the bag, Gary missed the large chunk of concrete on the badly damaged road and drove over it. In the process, the tires yanked hard-left and had him driving towards the ditch that ran along the side of the road. Instinctively, Gary dropped the bag onto the passenger-side floorboard, placed both hands back on the steering wheel, and yanked it right. The truck's tires fought for purchase on the gravel shoulder until they got traction. When he was back on paved road, Gary breathed a sigh of relief and left the bag where he had dropped it.

The truck's air conditioner was going full blast by the time Gary pulled up to the barn and parked. Two haphazardly parked vehicles sat to his right. The first one he recognized as his engineer's car: a comical, super-compact E.V. for Clarence, a 6'4", 240 lb. man. Next to the small EV, a candy-apple colored F350 with chrome mud flaps of a woman reading a book, sat parked. Michelle, his petite-framed daughter drove the truck. She couldn't weigh more than a buck and a quarter, and she chose a truck that dwarfed her 5'6" frame.

"Good morning," Gary greeted. Clarence and Michelle cut their conversation. Michelle had been worried about her father, and Clarence had been trying to reassure her. "Is there progress?" Gary said, unaware of the tension in the room.

Clarence functioned as Lazador's Chief Engineer. He had a chestnut complexion, with matching eyes. He was tall, muscular, and intimidating. Michelle's small frame always seemed smaller when she stood beside Clarence.

Michelle didn't appreciate her father being out past dawn. He knew better than to worry his daughters. Claudia had already called three times to check in on his whereabouts.

Taking the bag of groceries from her father, Michelle started in on him. "Dad, Claudia, and I have been worried sick about you. Why did you take that old truck of yours? And, why were you so late? I am so glad you didn't get caught in that storm!" Gary saw

Clarence crack a slight smile. “I better let Claudia know you are back. She is probably ready to go look for you.”

Ever since his wife’s death, Gary’s daughters seemed to have decided they would smother him. All he wanted to do was to ask them to give him some breathing room, but he loved his daughters profoundly and knew they had his best interest at heart. Still, he wished they would stop mothering him.

Clarence and Gary exchanged commiserating looks. Gary knew that Clarence had gotten an earful as well.

“You could have called my cellphone,” Gary said, taking his phone out of his front pocket and noticing he’d forgotten to put the battery back in before leaving the Nest that morning. “Stop,” he said, heading Michelle off before she could get started on her diatribe of safety and precautions. “I’ll call Claudia in a bit. Right now, what I need is a progress report.”

Gary placed a lot of pressure on Clarence and the engineers. They had a deadline to meet: finalize the first phase of the Nest for move in. And Michelle knew that took priority in Gary’s mind, even over his own wellbeing.

A shift in Clarence’s posture told Michelle to let it drop. Grudgingly, she nodded and walked over to the refrigerator to put the meat away. Only one bag, and half full? She took that as a good sign. The transition to vegan had been easy for Michelle. In fact, she embraced the change and wished she had done it earlier, but she was well aware of how many soon-to-be residents were struggling with it, including her father.

“We have made progress. Significant progress. But first, I need to tell you that two drones were spotted near the northeast corner of the ranch. They never came this way, but they were combing the area.”

The northeast corner of the ranch. Gary tried to recall what was there.

“Do we know why they were there?”

“No. It does not make sense. There’s nothing there, dad,” Michelle offered. “It is just vacant land. It used to be the Girone farm, but it has been abandoned for nearly fifteen years. The barn’s roof has already caved in.”

The description allowed Gary to pull a picture of the area from memory. “Girone. Right!” Michelle gave him a nod and Gary went to examine the map that hung between

the two wood-framed windows. It was a topographical map of the California Central Valley. Gary next turned his attention to Clarence and said, "Are we still spreading the excavated dirt on their land?" Lazador dumped tons of freshly dug soil every night, a satellite would likely register any change in topography.

Scattered loose papers covered an upturned crate that had been set up to function as a haphazard table. Clarence placed a big hand on it and said, "No. Not for the last year. After the first drone we began dumping the soil farther from home." He went to the map and pointed to a green pin. "Here, we dump into this canyon. It's a really deep canyon, so I doubt a satellite would easily pick it up. Also, we've taken extra care to remain as invisible as possible as we move up and down the canyon. Every truck has been painted black. No headlights are used. Drivers rely on night vision goggles to navigate the jagged roads." There had been a few harrowing experiences for a few of the drivers, but it wasn't something Gary needed to know about.

Gary nodded and wondered who the drones could belong to. Not for the first time, he was relieved that Clarence and his team had had the presence of mind to hide the Nest and the construction equipment within two mammoth barns.

As he ran a hand over the gray stubble he called a beard, Gary said, "You said two drones?" Clarence nodded. "What's your take?"

Clarence shrugged and said, "I met up with a CIA friend a few weeks back. You know that chatter about Kenneth Montes and the ARs."

A rumor had run through circles of those in the know that claimed Kenneth, and a small team of engineers, had developed the first ever Artificial Respirator prototype. AR technology is said to have the capacity to respire at the rate of thousands of trees per day.

"They're doing it?" Gary said, somewhat surprised. He and Clarence had speculated about the viability of the project weeks ago, when the rumor first hit the rumor mill. Neither thought any progress would be made, because Kenneth Montes would need government financing to build them.

Michelle perked up. "You don't believe those rumors, do you?" She said, hoping he did, and that he confirmed them as true. "With the Amazon dying, that technology couldn't come at a better time." They would need an army of them working around the clock if they were to reverse global warming.

“It’s only the prototypes they’re building right now.” Clarence would not get his hopes up and he wanted to make certain Michelle wouldn’t either. Too many people were already talking about the ARs as if they were humanity’s Hail Mary.

Gary noticed that Clarence had not mentioned his friend’s name. He would not press for it. Clarence would not share any such information if he didn’t have it on good authority.

“I doubt the prototypes will change anything. From what I understand, those artificial lungs would need to respire at the rate of the whole Amazon forest, twice over, in order to capture and bury sufficient carbon dioxide. Also, it’s going to take decades, possibly centuries before we actually see any improvement.” Gary closed his eyes and shook his head and said, “But what does that have to do with the drones?”

Sometimes, Michelle wished her father were less of a realist, because then she might be able to hold on to hope for a little longer.

“It seems that Kenneth is scouting out locations for his prototypes.”

“Logical,” Gary said, shaking his head slightly.

“What? What is logical?” Michelle said, not understanding the logic.

Clarence turned to Michelle and explained. “He needs to hide the ARs from the multinationals.” Still confused, Michelle shook her head and gave him a look that demanded a better effort from him. “Whomever has the ARs in their possession could weaponize them, or commoditize them. Think of what happened to Solvent Crypto.”

The logic connected with Michelle. “You think they would try to control the ARs to gain power?” Michelle said, shaking her head as if to will reality away.

“They are doing just that with crypto,” Gary said, feeling mentally drained. They had a lot to do and a short time to do it, if they were going to move into that Nest on time.

The multinationals’ move on crypto caused global seismic power shifts. In a sudden shock to global governments, thirteen cross-sector multinational corporations conspired successfully to dominate Blockchain and gain Consensus control over the world’s most traded crypto currency—Solvent Crypto. Soon after, the multinationals instituted a five-year grace period for consumers to exchange their current currencies into Solvent Crypto currency. Overnight, all other crypto currencies collapsed and the thirteen multinational

corporations gained currency manipulation control. So much for autonomous, decentralized, and secure currencies.

“Now,” Gary said, as he took a beat to refocus his thoughts, “tell me about our progress. How do we look?”

The cloth sacks that covered the windows had yellowed, but they were thick and helped keep the heat out. “We’re really close...” Michelle listened to Clarence as she drew the shutters shut, providing an extra layer of insulation from the external rising temperatures. “...and the main cave, or the communal dining area, is fully reinforced and finished. A bit of unexpected good news. We should be finished with the first round of honeycombs this week.” The honeycombs would function as the resident dormitories. Clarence’s large, ebony hands went to his trim waist and a focus shift caused his right brow to drop a tad lower than the left. “So, it’s safe to say that the first phase, at least, will be completed as forecasted.”

The hope had been for the first group of Lazador Nest residents to begin their move-in within the next month, and it seemed as though that goal might be met.

“Great news!” Gary said, genuinely pleased. When they first decided to attempt to build their own Nest, Gary hadn’t actually believed they would pull it off.

Clarence gave him a moment, then said, “We’re nearly there!” Water had begun flowing into the Nest from the underground lake. The vertical greenhouses that would feed the populations had been fully built; although, some pesky issue with the temperature controls stubbornly persisted. “We may still have need to migrate above ground to the existing greenhouses for at least a couple of years. After that, we shouldn’t need to supplement the crop output from our below ground greenhouses.” At least that was the goal.

Gary nodded his approval. He had conjectured as much. “We should maintain every greenhouse we have and use it for as long as we can. That includes the two that are above ground.”

The two above ground greenhouses, along with the medicinal growing houses, had been much on Gary’s mind as move-in approached. A secondary food source would allow room for any forecast errors that might have been made.

“Got it.” Clarence made a note on a small notepad he kept in the back pocket of his pants.

The existing greenhouses were located on the adjacent farm that Gary purchased under a pseudonym. They were operated out of old, beat-up warehouses that once housed large farm equipment. On paper, the equipment rental business remained operational. The business continued to file tax returns that showed a loss. It was Gary’s attempt to maintain a thread of legitimacy and keep government inquiries at bay. The greenhouses housed thirty-foot-tall, Ferris wheel-like hydroponic beds, which were of a prior technological iteration of the ones built for the Nest.

“Marco will hate it,” Gary warned.

“He does,” Michelle injected. Marco had already been informed. “He grumbled, but he’s onboard,” she added.

Once again, Gary nodded his approval.

“The water and sewage treatment plants are all in place. Every resident on the list should be moved in by the end of the year.” Clarence held out the list for Gary to peruse. “And, as discussed, the design can be expanded as needed in the future.”

“Great.” Gary eyeballed the list, but did not take it. “We need to add Martha Jacobson and her two boys to this list.” Clarence and Michelle waited for Gary to elaborate, but he did not. “All exciting news.” He allowed everyone to bask in the moment before moving on. “And the grain silos?”

Michelle would take the question. A swath of her long black hair spilled down the left side of her face when she looked down at her clipboard. She tucked it behind her left ear and flipped to the next page. She hesitated. “Well,” she began, “we are getting there. But we still have a lot of work to do. We’re at thirteen percent of capacity, a seven percent delta from target.” She flipped to the prior page on the clipboard and pursed her lips. She wished she had better news to report, but it was what it was. “We’ll have to make it up with next year’s grain acquisition.”

Gary furrowed his brow. “Twenty percent of our grain storage capacity is not an unreasonable target, what am I missing? Why are we falling short?” Gary had used his FBI connections to secure grain contracts from around the globe.

“Nature. We couldn’t account for the fact that the entire Indian crop would be wiped out by the floods, or that our Kenyan vendors would lose their crop to the fires. Complicating things further are the global governments who have appropriated their rice, beans, and wheat crops for the next few years. Feeding global populations is incredibly difficult during our climate crisis.”

“And expensive,” Clarence topped off. He still couldn’t believe how much they paid for what they had managed to acquire.

Gary lost his good mood. Part of the shortage was his fault. He’d been so busy thinking about everything else, he dropped the ball once the contracts had been signed. “We may very well be worse off next year.”

Michelle took the clipboard and hugged it to her chest and said, “There’s a chance, but it’s not a....”

“It’s not a guarantee,” Clarence jumped in, acknowledging the headwinds they faced. “But it certainly is highly probable. Climate change has complicated things far more than what we had accounted for when we started this, and we never adjusted our forecasts.”

Clarence’s point was noted, but it changed nothing for any of them. They all knew that that very obstacle to meeting their grain reserves was also the primary incentive for them to go below ground. Global populations had already begun to experience food shortages; malnutrition had returned to countries like Ireland and the U.S. and an uptick in disease pandemics affected everyone.

“Every year is a worse gamble than the last,” Gary said, feeling the pinch. Only thirteen percent of their grain target had been met. That shortage had to be made up somewhere else, but where?

Grain and seed acquisitions hadn’t exactly gone smoothly for those in charge of food reserves for Lazador. Non-GMO seeds were nearly nonexistent. Gary had connected with a government official willing to sell some from the United States seed reserves, but he had gone radio silent before the transaction could take place. The vertical gardens had also been a struggle, which was why Gary had been set on hanging onto the ones above ground, for as long as he could. Now, a recalculation would have to be completed in order to ascertain whether they could move into Lazador’s Nest this year, or whether they should hold off one more year.

Three

That Night.

Inside an abandoned fruit distribution warehouse, two beat-up portable air conditioners sat next to a mud-encrusted, six-by-nine-foot beveled glass window with deliberate breaks for the exhaust. Whining and groaning, their internals churned and blew out blasts of coolness that were instantly enveloped and tempered by the hot night air.

To those working the vertical gardens, it felt as though nothing had worked out as planned.

“They weren’t all supposed to mature and ripen at once,” Marco Hernandez, the lead horticulturist, had a habit of speaking to himself out loud. He took his cheap, purple handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his brow, but the effort was futile. Within seconds, a film of sweat had reappeared and coated his forehead.

The vertical gardens were operating under less-than-ideal conditions, complicating everything. Constant prolonged power outages wreaked havoc on the plant light schedules and upheaved the crop grow schedule. Sweltering daily temperatures lingered day and night, thanks to the lack of insulation inside of the warehouse walls. The challenges felt daunting at times, and telling himself that the warehouse had been built to store machinery and not to house a greenhouse, or people, especially not in forsaking heat, didn’t make the situation easier for Marco. The nocturnal schedule helped, but not enough.

“What do you think?” Marco said. He blinked a few times to keep the sweat from running into his eyes. The tightness in his thick voice emphasized his frustration.

Olivia was slowly making her way down the ladder. Every vertical garden had two ladders, one on each end, allowing repairs to be made at every level. The new vertical

gardens had been designed to have automatic ascending and descending platforms, which would eliminate the need for someone like Olivia to climb sixty flights—two flights per floor—to reach the top.

Drops of sweat free-fell from Olivia's chin and reached the ground long before she had. It bothered her that her sweat-heavy clothes sagged in parts and stuck to her skin in others, but she was learning to live with it.

"I emptied my entire water pack." Olivia's cadence expressed her own surprise. "It's so much worse up there." She noted Marco's lack of empathy and moved on. At five-feet five-inches, they stood at eye level.

Olivia stood akimbo, with her legs apart, and stared straight up. Her honey brown hair was held together in a sweaty twisted bun. The water pack that had been strapped to her back had caused her backside to become saturated with sweat.

Exhausted crop harvesters stood across from them, on the opposite side of the vegetable beds, busily harvesting as the bed continued its slow, circular rotation. Each rotation gave them no more than a minute before it moved away and a new bed was within reach.

Random thuds and splats struck the ears. Overripe tomatoes were unceremoniously plucked from wilting plants and dropped into plastic buckets. Most had ripened to the point that they disintegrated on impact and created a crushed tomato sauce.

Olivia cast her eyes on the bucket with the red soupy fruit as she swam in the deep pool of her thoughts.

As usual, Marco patiently waited for Olivia's guidance, hoping she had a solution for him.

"Marco," a groggy, silver-haired harvester with heavy eyes called to him. Marco looked across, through the slow rotating gap between the horizontal vegetable beds. A man lifted and tilted the bucket for him to see. A liquid crush of overripe tomatoes sloshed inside at the bottom. "Worse than yesterday."

With every day that passed, more ripened. Over ripened tomatoes were the reason he pushed himself, and his crew, so hard the last few days. It had become imperative that they finish the tomato harvest by the end of the night. Vexed with himself and his inability to get a handle on the temperature control inside the warehouse, he looked over his

exhausted crew. After he breathed deeply, he told himself that it would all work out. It had to.

Marco pursed his lips. "I know. Just harvest every bit of fruit as quickly as you can."

Taking a step back, Marco stood side by side with Olivia. He then tilted his head upwards to see as far up as possible, all the way to the top, and he felt like the weight of the world sat on his shoulders. Too much remained undone.

"This is maddening," she said, as she fought a desire to do nothing but sit on the floor and scream. The sun's intense heat complicated everything. "But we have to find a solution, since I've recently," that very morning, in fact, "been informed that your vertical gardens will have to shore up the unexpected grain shortages."

Olivia had completely missed the derisive gaze Marco directed at her. Unphased, she relayed the information he had not yet received.

"You are kidding, right? Shore-up the unexpected grain shortage? How?! I am already clawing at walls from the stress I'm under!" The exigent workload Marco felt had not been kept a secret from his employees, most of whom viewed him as a pressure cooker ready to pop.

Lazador simply did not have enough community members to adequately staff the harvest crew. Their numbers were not enough to harvest the entire crop in a few days, not before the crops spoiled on the vine. Now they wanted him to shore up the unexpected grain shortage? Having no alternative resources, or outside means of finding a resolution, he told himself to take a deep breath and do his best. It was not lost on him that he'd been taking a lot of deep breaths lately.

If only the power outages would stop and the plant light timers could do their job. If only the climate controls would work as they are supposed to. If. If. If. Marco stopped his train of thought, accepting the futility of his situation. Instead, he focused on making sure as little of the tomato crop as possible went to waste. It served no one to complain. Push ahead, that is the only choice they all had.

The silver-haired worker rejoined the ranks of the silent workers. After six nights of nonstop harvest, they were all too tired to carry a conversation. Four men and two women, standing a few feet apart, worked over the same bed before it rotated up and away. Pure

exhaustion was what prevented them from pausing their work for even a minute, afraid it would be too hard to start up again.

“Runners! We need more buckets!” A female voice called out from an aisle behind Marco. Moments later, a runner slogged past him carrying an armload of buckets, balancing them as he sluggishly moved, exchanging empty buckets for full ones as he went along. Several other runners could be seen running up and down other aisles carrying their own loads—they too seemed to be at the point of dropping where they stood from exhaustion. He prayed they hung in there.

Runners were tasked with moving the nightly harvest onto a pallet for a forklift to move to the other side of the warehouse where the refrigerators sit. Marco watched from a distance as a small-framed, thin kid of maybe fifteen, struggled with the heavy burden of a full bucket. He fully expected her to drop it, but she struggled with it before resorting to dragging it. Occasionally, the bucket nicked her shins. Lifting the bucket three inches to get it on the pallet seemed to cost her more energy than she had—yet she managed it.

Visibly exhausted but feeling accomplished, the girl squeezed her hands together a few times to get the feeling back. As soon as she recovered enough energy, she limped back to work.

Marco’s head shook at the daunting task ahead of them and turned his attention back to his engineer, who still stood beside him. She had been absorbing everything with him.

“They all seem pretty tired,” Olivia said, brushing her runaway wisps of matted hair from her forehead with a five-finger brush. “Actually, we’re all pretty tired.”

“We are,” Marco agreed, turning his attention towards the swaying workers working across from them. “But we’re getting close to move-in and we have to make sure we have a solid safety net of food... just in case.” He thought they’d better not have two years of bad crops once they were below ground, or they would be living off canned mush.

His thoughts were pulled in a different direction when a worker pushed the button to make the vertically rotating vegetable beds rotate a bit faster. “Jay! Jay! You gotta let go of the button! That is too fast!” They continued to rotate. Marco quickly realized that Jay had fallen asleep with his finger pressing the button. Marco leapt into action. Pulling up his pants to his navel, he hurriedly sauntered over. When he tapped Jay on the shoulder, the man seemed surprised to find Marco standing next to him. Marco shook his head and

reversed the rotation, so that the fresh beds were at waist height for the workers and said, “Jay, go get some coffee, then get back to work.”

With a dazed look, Jay nodded and did as he was told.

Marco sighed, “Well, Olivia, what do you think? Can we do anything about it?”

Olivia shook her head in resignation. “It is the heat and the power outages. And I can’t do anything about either.”

Marco nodded. “I guess I already knew what you would say.”

The extreme daytime temperatures had proven too much for the old industrial air conditioners tasked with cooling the poorly insulated warehouse housing his vertical and hydroponic farms, but the power outages wreaked the most havoc.

“It’s also why we’re using more water than we’d estimated.” She took a thoughtful step back and tilted her head upwards again. “At this point, all I can tell you,” she said, focusing on the very top beds as she spoke, recalling the intense, suffocating heat she felt up there, “is that until we’re in the Nest, we’re going to have to make do.” The warehouse was thirty stories high and the last bed was only six inches below the ceiling. “Things will be a lot different once we are operating inside the Nest. The greenhouses will be insulated, you’ll have climate control, and there will be no more power outages affecting your timers and garden lights.”

“Perhaps I should rotate the beds more often.”

The engineer shrugged and said, “That will help, but truthfully, there’s just too much out of your control.”

At the far-left corner of the warehouse, opposite the vertical gardens and Marco, stood the kitchen. Along the back wall sat two massive, well-used, stainless steel, eight burner stoves with dual ovens. To the left of them stood three, shoulder to shoulder, walk-in refrigerators and two ginormous freezers. In the center of the kitchen, five kitchen staffers surrounded two large, rectangular steel butcher tables. Adjacent to them, a wall of wooden pallets made heavy with mason jars and other supplies flanked stacks of dry goods stored in sacks.

Towards the back end of the kitchen, between the table and the stoves, two sweaty men were at work wearing hairnets, heavily stained aprons, and heat safe gloves. Though

exhausted, they kept busy sanitizing jars in huge vats of boiling water. Across from them, between two tables, two women, similarly dressed to the men, ladled pickled green beans into the sanitized jars. Across from them, a third woman, Yesenia, Marco's wife, fell further and further behind with her task of sealing jars.

The kitchen staff had fallen into an exhaustion-induced hypnosis. Each of them mechanically performed their tasks in utter silence as their thoughts ruminated and weaved through events in their own private lives.

"I haven't seen you eat any animal protein this last week," the staffer known as "Guapo" said to his co-worker, the one referred to as "Bones" because of his skeletal physique. In the kitchen, only the women were referred to by their proper names.

It took a second, but Bones eventually registered the question. "Sorry." He looked at his watch—three hours to go. Then, with a disappointed sideways pucker of the lips, he replied, "Hardest thing I've ever done. I'm hungry all of the time, which means I'm always thinking about food I can't have." His tortured visage exemplified his longing. "Like right now, I'm imagining myself eating a big, juicy burger."

Guapo and the rest of the kitchen staff saw Bones as one of those skinny guys who could eat anything he wanted, in vast quantities, and still remain as skinny as a rail. It's that hereditary trait that made his fellow Nest members remind him that skinny did not necessarily mean healthy. It was a reminder he loathed hearing because he knew they were right. Still, Bones felt that he deserved a hall pass because, in his experience, eating habits were the hardest thing to change. And it was not like he was not trying.

In the background, boiling pots of water clattered as their lids pratted about. Mason jars being sanitized in scalding water battered against each other, clinking and clattering. A few feet away, a forklift groaned as its prongs lifted a pallet of mason jars, and another of fruit, from a wall of loaded pallets waiting to be used. Most had large sacks of salt, herbs, and spices stacked in orderly fashion, making them accessible and easy to keep track of.

"I get it. I had the same problem... It will take some effort on your part, but eventually your body will just stop craving meat."

"I don't know about that."

With an elbow to his friend's bony ribcage, Guapo said, "Ah, come on... have some faith. We've all done it." He looked into his skinny friend's doubt-filled eyes. "Try eating more than starchy vegetables. Incorporate greens, nuts, beans, and some quinoa... protein. That will help get your cravings under control."

Nodding as he mentally digested the advice, Bones pulled off his gloves and apron so that he could quickly towel off his sweaty body. Then, he took a candy bar out of his pocket and proceeded to bite into it. As the melted chocolate coated the inside of his mouth, he casually leaned against the table, savoring its richness, unbothered that his sweat-dampened shirt was clinging to him, outlining his skeletal frame.

"Okay," he said, through intermittent chews. "I can try that." He shoved the remaining melting piece into his mouth before licking his fingers.

"Dude, that's your fourth candy bar of the night!"

Denying nothing, Bones shrugged and said, "I am trying to have as many as I can before we go underground. Who knows how long our stash will last?" After a slight pause, he added, "Or, if we'll ever have chocolate again." His plan was to eat so much chocolate that he would develop an aversion to it. Success would mean one less thing for him to miss eating. By far, chocolate would be the most difficult food he gave up—more difficult than giving up meat.

Cacao was one of the crops on the chopping block. Per Gary, it would all depend on the vertical farms, how proliferous they were, and how much space they had for other, non-pertinent crops. Bones didn't agree that chocolate was a non-pertinent food, but he had no say in the matter.

The Nest, in Gary's words, was a living experiment that had to succeed, for all of their sakes.

"In that case, you should know that I'm thoroughly impressed by your inability to gain weight, given how unhealthy your diet is," Guapo said, his eyes tracing the outline of his friend's concave chest. "I mean, you eat starch, sugar, and meat. That is your diet." Earlier in the evening he watched Bones demolish an entire bag of potato chips, and that was after a filling lunch of pesto veggie pizza. Bones had not thought the pizza was enough.

"I think you're jealous," Bones riposted, clearly uncomfortable discussing his weight, or lack thereof.

“But you’re—”

“I don’t have a tape worm. Trust me. I have been checked. Anyway, I’ve already been lectured about my eating habits by Edward.” Edward was the unofficial in-house nutritionist, who has been vegan his entire life.

“Yeah? Did he give you good advice?”

“Yeah. He said I make poor food choices and—”

“And?” Guapo was grinning. Nothing new there.

“And,” Bones rolled his sunken eyes, “that I need to eat more vegetable proteins,” he grudgingly conceded. His thick, black head of hair was sopped and matted in a way that made him feel like he had a wet towel wrapped around his head; the sweat wouldn’t stop trickling down. He was sweating so profusely that he gave up even caring about it.

“Well then, I guess I’ll leave you be. It sounds like you’ve heard it enough.”

“I have,” he said, grateful to be spared the lecture. “You know what’s ironic?”

“What?”

“I don’t think being a vegetarian will be good for my weight.”

“Your weight?! You are as skinny as a cadaver!”

“Exactly my point!” Bones spread his scrawny arms so that his friend could give him a thorough inspection. Wanting to prove his point further, he lifted his soggy shirt, revealing his tightly wrapped skin over his skeleton. Guapo noticed that his skin was sunken wherever bone was lacking. “Without fat and sugar, I might disappear.” Satisfied that he had made his point, he changed the subject. “Did you read the news this morning?”

Guapo’s thoughts stuttered a bit. He was still stuck on how skinny Bones was. Realizing that he was still staring at Bones’ chest, he checked himself and said, “About what?”

“The multinationals. They defeated the Base National Income initiative.” When he’d read the news, he felt relief that he had chosen Lazador’s Nest over the status quo. Wrestling with a thought he added, “I just can’t wrap my head around how people are surviving out there. Artificial Intelligence is swiftly replacing the whole of human labor.” With a good headshake, he added, “There is no way around it. People are going to need some sort of income stipend. Hell, they already do! Wages are so depressed, and wealth is so concentrated... I do not see another way!”

Guapo had read the news, but somehow, he'd missed that part. "Of course, they defeated it. They know it would require them to pay a huge tax to fund it." Palms up, he added, "The government cannot fund it. They can't collect tax revenue from an unemployed population. So, if a stipend is going to be paid, it's going to have to be the multinationals agreeing to tax themselves."

Bones laughed out loud, and apologized immediately after to his startled co-workers who glared at him with exhaustion-filled eyes. "Could you imagine them ever taxing themselves?" He made a sniffing sound. "If they ever agreed to, I'd say there was something rotten in the air."

"The air has been rotten for a long time now. Besides, if they ever did agree, it would be because they found a way to curb population growth for the long run." Guapo nodded and his golden curls bounced along. "They'd want a downward sloping population growth curve that would guaranty a declining expense... to them."

"Well, do not say that. I mean, the human population is clearly shrinking. Global warming has begotten us new, exotic diseases that previously only survived in the tropics. Millions of people have already died. People are going blind from sun exposure, even dying from it at unprecedented rates. Crops are failing, causing huge swaths of people to starve to death. Fresh water lakes are being overtaken by algae blooms, making our supplies undrinkable... and then you have surging rampant poverty, so that no one can buy what is available in the market place. And just to tidy it up, we have more people dying from malnutrition in their homes than in any other developed nation. I mean... by that measure, I'm surprised they didn't approve the BNI."

Astonished to have it all laid out so plainly, Guapo took a moment. "It makes you wonder when, exactly, we handed the reins of power to the multinationals and the wealthy... how did we allow them to become our proxy government?" He thought of the millions who would never have a Lazador as an alternative, like they did, and it filled him with sorrow.

"The multinationals?" Bones said, as he dropped a basket of jars into the pot of scalding hot water, then smeared the sweat on his forehead with a soppy hanky he kept in his back pocket. "One sure way was allowing billionaires and multinationals to build, launch, and control the largest Satellite fleet outside of the U.S. Military. Still cannot

believe it happened. Why did we think it was okay to give a multinational CEO such breathtaking, unimaginable power?"

Guapo nodded. He could not believe it, either. "And now they are accreting... buying up their competitors! Solidifying! Becoming a global economic and military power! I agree. And you have to admit that it's not unreasonable to extrapolate that out, into the future, and arrive at the conclusion that it's only a matter of time before multinationals rule, not just the U.S., but the world's governments." Taking off a thick, rubber glove, Guapo proceeded to rake his fingers through his sweaty golden hair, and said, "The CEOs of these multinationals would be kings, and the world would be their kingdom. With their wealth, they could buy governments, like you and I buy groceries, or at least used to buy groceries." Groceries, especially fresh food, had become exorbitantly overpriced. The poor lived off potato chips, canned foods, and other processed foods made from inputs that were questionable as to whether they were food at all.

Yesenia, who was working at the adjacent table to Bones and Guapo, was doing her best to ignore their conversation. She was preoccupied with thoughts of her own unraveling life.

"They should have been stopped a long time ago," Bones said, recalling the wave of protests that swept the nation only a few weeks ago. The police and National Guard had been called in. They had been equipped with military gear: drones, armored tanks, and machine guns—the works. Many hundreds of thousands died that day. Weeks passed and they had yet to release the number of people that had 'gone missing'.

"Stopped by who? Look at how many people have already died trying. Besides, people have grown afraid of their own government."

They were so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't notice the sideway glances they were getting from Yesenia, who was becoming increasingly agitated with their chatter.

"It does not matter. It is too late now. I mean, would jobs come back if government said, 'Hey, stop outsourcing. Stop automating. The people in those communities need jobs too!'" Disappointed, he added, "No. I don't think so."

"Well, I can tell you that outsourcing is not the problem... mechanization and automation, those are the problems now," Guapo said, meanwhile Bones thought about

his training as a mechanical engineer and how much he paid for the education. Now there were so many newly minted engineers competing with Artificial Intelligence that they depressed wages to an untenable rate. He had no choice but to walk away from his career. Guapo continued in the background, “Well, at least we’re incentivizing them to bring jobs back by giving them tax breaks for manufacturing within our borders.”

Bones let out another loud laugh. Yesenia’s head snapped in his direction, but he never noticed. Neither did Guapo. “What a racket. The only ‘jobs’ that came back are the ones done by machines. While they are getting tax breaks, our communities and government coffers are losing income tax dollars from the disappearing jobs.”

By then, Yesenia was exhausted and grumbling to herself about their conversation. She knew they were right about the world outside of the Nest. Out there, corruption and power consolidation were submerging the masses in a quagmire of poverty, but it still enticed her. Getting distance between herself and her husband was also enticing to her. For years, their marriage has been in tatters. Marco’s machismo wore thin on her, as did his womanizing ways. She’s tolerated him and his careless ways for the sake of their boys, but being inside the Nest in constant close proximity to the intolerable man left her feeling exhausted day and night. Two more years and her boys would be fifteen and seventeen. She kept telling herself that she couldn’t leave Marco before then, though the desire to leave him and never see him again consumed her thoughts.

“I don’t know,” Inez, a blithe, twenty-eight-year-old kitchen staffer, said as she ladled green beans into jars, and invited herself into the conversation. “Rumor has it that the multinationals are contributing billions to interconnect San Francisco’s high-rises with one another via air-conditioned walkways. They are calling it a SunSafe community. Apparently, it is the way of the future.” Blowing a stubborn, sweaty strand of hair from her face, she added, “That’s somewhat appealing.”

“I agree,” Yesenia said, already regretting butting in.

Bones and Guapo exchanged a surprised look before the former said, “It might sound nice because you get to be above ground and all, but you still have to be able to afford to live there... and you’ll be at the mercy of the multinationals, and most likely jobless.” Multinationals loved to automate jobs to minimize their outlay, regardless of what it did to the people of their country. The people who made them. The people who bought their

products and services and grew their wealth. “Corporate national loyalty is as alive as a decomposed corpse.”

Yesenia’s hackles rose. Those were the same words her husband had thrown at her during last night’s heated exchange, during which she threatened to leave him. Smugly, Marco chided her for being naïve, but he failed to make the distinction between naïveté and outright hate-driven rationalization. Yesenia was of the latter.

“Enough with wasting time on meaningless conversations!” Yesenia’s usually soft features had hardened. Back to work!” She said, with a poignancy that caught everyone off guard.

Several minutes of silence ticked by, each felt like an hour. Bones and Guapo went back to their respective thoughts. Yesenia, with a frown that creased her forehead, took on a distant look as her thoughts drifted back into her private problems.

“I don’t know, but something’s got to give. Governments can’t turn their backs on their people.” Yesenia’s moment of solitude was cut short by Gracie, the young, diffident girl who was part of the kitchen team.

Gracie’s voice always carried a tinge of guilt and insecurity, which Bones knew came from the fact that she still had a mother out there in the world. Bones also knew that because of less-than-ideal life circumstances, Gracie’s mother had fallen into heavy drug use. The drug use eventually led to Gracie being abandoned on the streets of Madera. What Bones didn’t know was that Gracie still cared for, and worried about, her mother. Only Yesenia knew that.

Bones lost his own parents to a car accident, victims of a drunk driver. The entire story was a tragedy. The man who drank too much and was responsible for the head-on collision that took the life of Bones’ parents, had lost his home that same morning. He had lost his job six months prior to that day. The company, a multinational accounting firm, automated the last swath of accounting jobs. Overnight his skillset had become obsolete. The man’s wife had walked out on him just over a month before the accident, taking their eight-year-old daughter with her. Broken in every sense of the word, the man committed suicide in his cell before the trial could begin. He hung himself with his bedsheet.

Pity was all Bones could feel for him, not hate. What Bones did hate, even resented, was the social and economic structure that allowed a person to be pushed to the fringes, so that wealth could be further concentrated at the top.

“But they have. Look around. It is why we’re here and not in a city,” Inez said. The small, stalky woman had been laboring quietly as she ladled green beans into jars.

“Enough!” Yesenia pleaded, trying to brush her sweaty, jet-black hair off her cheek with her shoulder, while simultaneously working to fix the lid onto a jar. She failed. The jar slipped from her grasp and fell onto its side, spilling its contents.

Helplessly, they all watched, frozen in place, as the green beans swam away on the running liquid and splattered onto the floor like dead fish. In her effort to stop the jar from rolling off the table, Yesenia inadvertently thumped it and accelerated its escape. When it crashed onto the floor, she accepted defeat by throwing her hands up into the air and backing away.

“Argh!” Yesenia shrieked. Taking her gloved hand, she wiped the spilled contents onto the floor. “Argh!”

Marco, who wrapped up his conversation with his engineer, heard his wife curse from across the room and sauntered over to investigate. Once there, he stood with his feet far apart and took in the pitiful sight. The five people in the kitchen looked as if they were about to keel over.

Guapo elbowed Bones and tipped his head towards Marco. Gracie followed his blue-eyed gaze to where Marco stood, and she elbowed Inez, who nudged Yesenia. Without words, they all got back to work, as if nothing had happened.

Inez, the four-foot-nine stalky woman, was using a ladle as long as her own arm to fill the jars. A knob of grey hair kept her thick mane out of her face as she worked. Marco could see her cringe and fight the pain in her left arm from days and hours of working the ladle. Every few minutes she would switch arms to distribute the pain, but with every rotation the intervals grew shorter. Her muscles would need a rest. Soon. And Gracie, who had a five-inch advantage over Inez, stood between the tables with heavy eyes as she worked. It was a pure miracle that the girl hadn’t already collapsed onto the floor from sheer exhaustion.

Marco looked at his watch, only forty minutes to go before quitting time and they still had so much to do. Out of concern, he took one more glance at the working crew and billowed out without warning, "Where are Michael and Vicente?"

His authoritarian tone caused those in the kitchen crew to stop what they were doing and look over at their scowling boss. Marco's five-foot five-inch stature was not an intimidating one, but his temper certainly was. In dramatic fashion he brought his hands to his hips and a V-shaped scowl crowned the thick black, square-lens glasses that sat on the unattractive hump of his nose.

No one responded. The boys were most likely sleeping on a pile of rags in a backroom. Not one of them begrudged them their needed rest. After all, they were children. Over the last few days, the boys had stood side-by-side with everyone in the kitchen, washing, peeling, and cutting.

"Do not get all worked up. I will go find them. They're boys, you know," Yesenia resentfully replied to her husband who glared at her, expectantly.

The two other women in the kitchen exchanged a sideways glance and prepared themselves.

"No, Yesenia!" Marco's voice dialed up a few octaves. "They are thirteen and fifteen! They are young men." Everyone braced for his well-rehearsed oration. "We are living in different times. There is no time for childhood. Find them and get them back in here. We are all overworked and we cannot afford to spare their help."

Everyone in the kitchen pretended to be too busy to notice the power struggle taking place between Marco and Yesenia. They stood nearly ten feet apart, their eyes casting daggers at each other, and their postures seemed to be crouched like tigers, ready to pounce and clamp down on the other's jugular.

Those in the kitchen worked to avoid making eye contact with either of them, afraid of being dragged into the War of the Hernandez House.

A quiet young man, one of the runners who had been busy tearing off the saran wrap from around supply pallets, making them easier to access for the kitchen crew, happened to hobble into the kitchen area just then. When he saw the tension between Marco and Yesenia, he quickly hobbled away as if he'd forgotten something in some other part of the warehouse. A very far away part.

“Yesenia!”

When Marco growled her name, the guy hobbling away happened to look back towards the kitchen and noticed that everyone had simultaneously dropped their heads another inch, as if what they were doing required some intense form of concentration.

Embarrassed, Yesenia dared a glance at her worn-out co-workers and felt a sudden pang of guilt for indulging her sons. Everyone was working long hours and putting in hard labor. No one, including her sons, should be exempt.

“Marco, it is okay. We understand—”

“No. It’s not okay,” Yesenia said, cutting Inez off and placing a hand on her shoulder. “Marco is right. I will go find them.”

Shocked, Marco seemed to stumble back a half step.

What just happened? Did she just agree with me? Never before had he won an argument with his wife. Unsure of how to proceed, he pulled his pants up a tad higher and strutted off, feeling empowered.

Four

In Reedley proper, Edward and four of his fellow workers travelled from abandoned home to abandoned home, tending to their hemp plants. Solar panels lined the roof of every abandoned structure employed for growing. Some panels provided power to the garden lights, and others juiced up the batteries.

Edward, a tanned, blue-eyed, mellow guy and his cast of expert growers considered themselves the Atelier des Lazador's Nest. They had been tasked with providing the hemp needed to make clothes and other Nest essentials.

"Hey, Edward. I got some news!" said Jimmy, the pockmarked, skinny redhead, as he sprinted into what they dubbed the Pepto house due to its hot pink exterior.

The door slammed behind him, startling the crew. Edward, Steven, Mildred, and Moose had been hunched over their plants, inspecting their progress when Jimmy startled them into an upright position.

Reflexively, Edward rolled his eyes. Jimmy was always going out of his way to accidentally annoy those around him, and yet he was considered a loveable guy by the very same people.

"Spit it out, Jimmy," Mildred growled as she brought up a portly hand to push up the wire-rimmed glasses that sat on her greasy, blackhead-covered nose.

Sweaty and huffing, Jimmy snapped his scrambled thoughts together and said, "I just heard one of the engineers say that as of next month, no meat consumption will be allowed. At all." His eyes had widened, matching the alarm in his voice.

Once again, Edward rolled his eyes at Jimmy, then caught himself. With an inward smirk, he warned himself to stop that, or one day his eyes might get stuck in the back of his head. "Really, Jimmy? *That's* why you blew in here like a tornado?" Shaking his head,

he went back to what he'd been doing. "We all knew that was coming down the pipe. Moose started working on his diet three months ago."

Moose, whose nickname befitted his thick, husky stature, gave a big unhappy nod of confirmation. Jimmy noticed that he was dripping sweat from every visible crevice.

"Weren't you listening last week when Gary said that we can't be self-sufficient if we can't stop being dependent on meat?" The annoyance in Mildred's voice made every word come out like a jab with a sharp knife. Jimmy's look of complete confusion left her feeling exasperated. "So aloof," she said to no one in particular, but they all knew who she was referring to.

Mildred was a small, somewhat robustly built, Filipina woman. She was as mean as a tiger and as sharp as a blade. No one messed with her, especially since she seemed to be in a constant state of irritation.

"Well," Jimmy squirmed, feeling unappreciated. "I'm only telling you what I overheard."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Moose said with sincerity. Jimmy nodded at him appreciatively. "At least now I know that I have one month to ween myself completely off of meat." Every day they drew closer to the due date compounded Moose's anxiety. He wasn't sure that he was going to be able to do veganism. An irrational fear that hung in the back of his mind was that he might go mad, not from claustrophobia brought on from living below ground, but from an uncontrollable desire for meat that would monopolize his every thought.

"Enough, Moose. You are making me nauseous."

"Sorry."

Edward, a devout vegan, couldn't stomach the smell or thought of meat, which was why he was secretly ecstatic about the definitive date finally having been set. "Jimmy, what about the dwarfed willow and the other medicinal plants?"

Looking like a confused goldfish swimming in circles in a fishbowl, Jimmy tilted his head to the side.

Edward watched, actually witnessing the process of Jimmy's brain searching his thoughts for the correct answer. He shook his head, thinking to himself that it was a good

thing that Jimmy stopped sniffing glue when he had. Otherwise, he'd be operating with far fewer brain cells than he presently had, and it was already a dicey situation.

"Jimmy?!"

"Oh! Oh, yeah. Sorry. So, yeah. We will have some samples to work with. I was told that Marco is going to be given some seedlings in the next few weeks."

"I cannot believe we are going back to the indigenous ways for pain meds. I never thought I'd be chewing on tree bark to get rid of a headache." Moose had to wipe the sweat off his red face as he spoke and accidentally knocked the sunglasses off his face and onto the floor. The price for his mistake was high for someone of his girth, and the regret on his face showed it.

With laborious breaths, he placed his hand against the wall and leaned into it for support. Bracing against the wall, he brought himself down until he was on his knees. Once he had the sunglasses in hand, he followed the same procedure to get back up, only it took a couple of extra tries before he was fully upright again.

"Jimmy! You were saying!" Edward said, moving the group away from the awkwardness of having stared at Moose as if he was a side show.

"Oh... oh, yeah. So, Gary said we'll have enough antibiotics and pain medication to last us a year, but not much more beyond that." He crinkled his brow. "Did you know that antibiotics lose their effectiveness with time?"

"That's why they have expiration dates," Steven, the usually silent resident genius, chimed in.

Jimmy's expression said that he had just learned something new.

"That's right," Mildred confirmed with another impressive eyeroll meant for Jimmy.

"Jimmy! Anything else?"

"Oh...yeah. There is this lady... a Shaman lady from the heart of the Amazon that Gary recruited." Jimmy was basking in the sun. For the first time in his life, he was the one with all of the information. It helped that everyone in the room was hanging on every one of his words—what a glorious feeling!

Edward knew exactly what Jimmy was doing and regretted his decision of having tasked him with the fact-finding mission—he had known he had made a mistake when he gave Jimmy the task, but he couldn't bring himself to take it back.

“Jimmy!” Edward warned with gritted teeth. “Please, just—”

“Oh, yeah. Anyway.” Now he was nervous, seeing how irritated Edward was with him and all. He spoke even faster when he was nervous. “So... so,” his face contorted as he tried to recall something important. When it came to him, he said, “Oh, yeah. So, this Shaman lady, her, um.” He bobbed his head sideways a few times. Edward was about to burst at the seams with frustration. Jimmy finally said, “Her name is Diana.” Her birthname was Xaraí, but for some reason her mother refused to share, Xaraí’s name had been changed to Diana during her toddlerhood. “She supposedly cures diseases with plants that grow in the Amazon. So, I think Gary said that... what’s Marco’s wife’s name again?”

“Yesenia, dumbass,” Mildred chided, unable to control her own frustration with him for dribbling out the information.

Steven, the resident Biotech engineer, was suddenly interested in the conversation. His head popped up from what he had been busy with and began to pay attention.

Edward took notice.

“Oh, yeah, but wait, it’s not Yeseniadumb—” Then with a pause, Jimmy gave Mildred a disapproving look and chose to move on. “Right. So, Yesenia is going to go down to the Amazon... the part that hasn’t permanently flooded, and she’s going to spend a few days there with that Shaman lady. Did you know Yesenia is a bio-thinga-thing, just like Steven? Anyway, they are supposed to come back together with all the saplings.”

Before anyone else could speak, Steven interjected. “I’d like to go along. I think it would be good for me to learn from this Shaman, Diana.” Steven seemed resolved on going. He looked at Edward, his boss, for approval.

“Hey, talk to Gary. I think the more cross experience we have in the Nest, the better.”

Steven’s expression and the nod of his head told the group that he had every intention of doing just that. Gary had no reason to say no to his tagging along on the medicinal plant foraging expedition.

“Oh, yeah,” Jimmy interjected. “One more thing. It’s kinda creepy, if you ask me.” He looked around and was thrilled to have everyone’s attention again. But before he could bask in it, Edward cursed his name, causing Jimmy to jumpstart right where he had left

off. “Oh, yeah. Well, according to the farmer guy that recommended her to Gary, this Shaman lady has fingers that are like all gnarly and stuff from arthritis.”

Stunned, Mildred stared at him and said, “You’re an ass, Jimmy.”

Everyone agreed and walked away, leaving Jimmy to wonder what he had said to earn that.

The Yreka town’s people were gathered around the old bakery. Murmurings and grumblings filled the air. Montserrat elbowed her husband to let him know that Mayor Michaels was climbing the stairs to the makeshift podium.

The star-spangled midnight sky seemed to stretch in every direction, as if to infinity; beneath it, the stagnant hot air hung heavily.

“Thank you all for coming.” Heartache weighed down his words. Taking a kerchief from his front pocket, Mayor Michaels wiped the sweat from his bald head and forehead and said, “Now, I know you’re all worried. I say to you, don’t be. We are stronger together. We will come out stronger on the other side.” He privately hoped there would be an ‘other side.’

A general agreement rose from the crowd. Marta, glossy-eyed from the pain in her legs, held tight to her husband’s aged hand. She didn’t notice, but he stole loving glances of her, pleased that she had agreed to come out, in spite of the pain in her legs.

Montserrat smiled as her eyes settled on Brenda, whom Mayor Michaels was also focused on.

Jonathan Michaels was the recently elected Mayor of Yreka, at the ripe age of twenty-six. “Brenda, along with a few others from our community, have been working to put together a community strategy to help us survive climate change, and to guide us towards becoming a self-sustaining community. It is the only way we will survive.” If he had been expecting to hear surprised gasps from his fellow Yrekans, he would have been disappointed. Everyone there was aware of the shrinking government aid they were receiving. “Brenda, please come up and share what you’ve come up with.”

Grateful, Brenda ran up and jumped right in. “Hello. First of all, let me say that this is all preliminary, but it gives us a starting point. We will build upon this and make changes as they are needed.” The first part would be the hardest to convince them of. Steeling

herself for rejection, she said, “This is going to be the hardest thing, but I believe that with dangerous daily temperatures, we have no choice—” Brenda paused to take in the faces looking back at her. They turned to one another, to see if anyone knew what she was going to say. Then, with one big breath, followed by a big nod, Brenda continued, “We have to go nocturnal.” She paused for a response, but only got a sense of confusion. “We need to become nocturnal. Sleep by day and work by night.” It made sense. She knew it and the people knew it. Still, it wouldn’t be easy, though most of them were already pushing off most of their daily routines until the evening hours.

Silence.

“I’d try it,” Montserrat called out. “I like taking evening walks.”

“Technically, they’ll be morning walks in the dark,” Ebon said with some levity in his voice.

“Yeah... but at least I’ll be able to spend more than a harried minute outside,” someone else chimed in. It was Agnes.

The murmurs seemed to share a general agreeable consensus: Why wouldn’t they try it? At this point, they had nothing to lose.

“What about food?” Another called out.

“Our basements become greenhouses, as will the old auto repair shops. God knows we have plenty that have been abandoned,” Brenda said, her eyes sizing up the crowd, gauging their receptivity, which was much more amenable than she had anticipated.

“Will that be enough?” The alarm in Petra’s voice had the effect of raising the alarm felt by others. A slight grumbling could now be heard coming from the residents whose heads were now turned to one another in whispered conversation.

“Not on its own,” Mayor Michael’s voice commanded their attention again. “But we have the rations we’re receiving from the Government and Yule’s cattle farm.” Yule was an old family name. The family farm was currently being housed in multiple barns around the outskirts of town, which was the only remaining source of meat for miles.

“Our basement gardens and our coordinated efforts to limit food waste would also go a long way. In short, it will take sacrifices and contributions from all of us.”

Although no one mentioned it, they were all well aware of the shrinking Government rations. The cuts were made without giving notice or justification, which was why Mayor

Michaels was operating from a perspective that the rations would stop, sooner than later. It was his primary objective to ensure they were prepared when that day arrived.

Many towns' folk were afraid. They had children to feed. At the end of the day, they would have to remember that they were in much better shape than the big cities, where crime rates and disease had surpassed the fear of food shortages.

Five

Four months later.

During their two weeks in the Amazon, Diana and her team worked around the clock, and through insufferable rain, to harvest whatever medicinal saplings and plants still survived. The Amazon had already experienced eleven months of rain and there remained no Noah's Ark in sight. Climate shift brought rain storms that refused to cease long enough to allow the waters to recede. Natives believed that God was angry, that HE caused the world's rainclouds to become stuck above the Amazon because humanity had to be punished.

The Amazon experience left Steven with mixed emotions. Whenever he thought of his time there, he mentally travelled to the night he and Yesenia rushed along the rushing Amazon river in a canoe. They sat soaked from head to toe as they paddled hard against the river. By the time they made it back to the treehouse they shared with Diana, they were overwhelmed with exhaustion. Such a beautiful, natural place would soon be drowned and lost, meanwhile the rest of the world withered away in a stubborn drought. Amidst the catastrophic loss of biodiversity and human life, Steven managed to fall deeply in love.

"No. I'm not going to calm down. Where is she? Where is my wife?!" Marco's volume increased with each word, a learned behavioral trait that usually gained him what he wanted. Diana and Steven, his targets, were not impressed. Both looked back at him as if he were a nauseant mass of existence. The indignation oozed from every one of Marco's pores. "Steven—"

Steven, tall, slim, handsome, and usually very patient, found that he lacked it with Marco. Tight-jawed, he interrupted Marco and said, "Diana, I'm sorry." Michelle, Gary's

eldest daughter, remained seated behind the cherry-colored, particle-wood desk that Diana leaned against for support. “I just can’t deal with him right now.”

From the corner of her eye, Diana saw Marco jerk. Indignation slapped itself across his face. Still, she ignored him. “Wait outside, Steven. I’ll come get you when Gary arrives.”

Confused and unsure of how to proceed, Marco looked to Michelle for help, but she never looked up to meet his eyes. Diana and Steven behaved as if he weren’t present, as if it hadn’t been *his* wife who drowned in the Amazon! Marco couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t just rally around him and help him get through such a difficult time of his life. Instead, they treated him like a pariah. His brow creased and his eyebrows came closer together as he tried to understand how he had arrived there. *Gary! Where is Gary!?*

“Michelle—” Marco intended to plead his case to her, but Michelle cut him off when she reached for her ringing cellphone and took the call. Before long, she walked away in a whispered conversation.

Steven gently kissed Diana on the cheek and turned to leave without acknowledging Marco.

“Steven!” Indignant, Marco tried to call him back, but he did not get to say much more before Steven walked out the door.

Marco’s voice grated on Steven’s nerves like nails on a chalkboard. Just stepping away, being outside under the beauty of the starry night sky, he felt better. Even the hot, dry air felt nice against his skin; he supposed that was because he was home and not in a makeshift tree house in rising waters, in the middle of the Brazilian rainforest.

Once again, Steven’s thoughts reached into his memory bank, back to the day in the canoe. Back to the day when the banks of the river rushed past as their canoe was carried off by the river. Sheets of rain fell that day and augmented the river’s speed and girth. Out there, on that black river that reflected the angry sky back at itself, it had been just the two of them, amongst all of that natural beauty. What Steven most recalled was the way *she* looked. Yesenia’s long chestnut hair had been gathered in a soggy French braid, just the way he liked it. Her black mascara had smudged and run and her lips had taken on a natural rouge. Absolutely beautiful. And when he leaned forward, cupped her face

in his hands, and kissed those sweet lips, she melted into his arms. That day, life felt magical.

The Amazon scavenger trip had been Steven's opportunity to get to know Yesenia up close. Her presence had always pulled his attention in her direction; so, he planned to remedy his attraction to her in one way or another. And, he accomplished just that. Before the trip, he had known he felt a strong attraction to her. By the end of the trip, he knew that he had fallen completely in love with her. And then, reality returned when it was time to come home again.

Absentmindedly, Steven pulled the bench away from under the barn's eaves, straddled it, and lay back. There had been no starlit skies in the Amazon, only dark skies and rain.

The groan of a bulldozer drew his thoughts back to the present. He blinked and a billion stars blinked back. Sitting up again, Steven turned and watched as Peter, a former floor manager at a now defunct, big chain hardware store, who wore a red-light headlamp, directed a bulldozer driver. He guessed the driver to be Kevin, one of Peter's ex-employees at the hardware store. They had become friends long before they joined Lazador's Nest and they usually worked their shifts together.

If Steven were a betting man, he would bet that Katie, a cosmetologist in her previous life—when a semblance of an economy still existed in Reedley—was behind the wheel of the eighteen-wheeler.

Two vans pulled in and parked in the makeshift parking lot. When the doors opened, sixteen construction workers spilled out, ready to continue their work on their future home. The men and women wore the required hardhats and toolbelts with hanging hammers and other equipment. Boisterous conversation had erupted amongst them, the subject of which had been blurred out by other cars and conversations. Several other vehicles arrived. Steven watched in silence as his fellow Nest members, lost in their own thoughts and conversation, disappeared into the barn that stood a few feet behind the bulldozer.

Although the barn was big, compared to the average barn, the underground structure dwarfed it. Akin to an iceberg, the Nest's underground structure sprawled far beyond the bounds of the rectangular A-framed barn. It reached deep into the earth, beginning at the wide berth barn doors. The entrance then followed a gradual, declining ramp that reached

over forty feet into the earth. The first floor of the Nest was designed to be as wide as four football fields. The entire community was designed to function as a living, self-sufficient, self-contained, sovereign state. A Nest, as Gary referred to it, aptly named after a Patagonian wild bull wrangler—Lazador.

Perplexed, Marco waited for Gary inside of the small structure that had been converted into Gary's command center. His situation made absolutely no sense to him. When and why had Steven and Diana developed such a peculiar aversion to him? What had he done to deserve it? Steven, though he usually avoided Marco, had never taken a hostile stance towards him, at least not until today. And Diana, well, he never liked her and she never liked him, but they've always been amicable with one another, even if just barely.

Marco felt Diana's mercurial eyes bore holes into him, which he forced himself to ignore. Through it all, Michelle kept her focus on the stack of papers on her desk. It seemed like such an avoidance production, the way she flipped through and eyed each page with such concentration that Marco forewent any attempt to engage her.

So, he decided to try and get through to the only avenue that remained to him. "Please, Diana! I am begging you! She was my wife!" Marco shirked back when Diana somehow injected more hatred into her glare. "Di... Dia—" He stumbled and stopped talking when he saw her jaw set, tight. Suddenly, he thought he felt her hatred pass through him and he shivered.

"Gary will be here shortly." Diana's cadence was like cold steel striking cold steel. The atmosphere in the office had become so uncomfortable that Michelle wished she could be anywhere but there.

The tension in the air was larded thick when Gary walked in. Diana and Marco stood opposite one another in confrontation. A permafrost seemed to float between them. "Diana," Gary gave the old, fragile woman a hug and a kiss on each cheek. "Come, let's go somewhere more private." He caught Michelle's relieved glance and pretended he had not seen it. Instead, he focused on Diana, who looked like she needed to get away from Marco. "Marco," he said, as he placed a hand on the man's shoulder to keep him where he was. "Give us a few minutes. I'll come get you when I know more."

“But, Gary.” Gary felt Diana’s body tense up, so he kept his other hand on her arm and reassured her with a slight squeeze. “She was my wife! I, above all, have a right to know!” Gary locked his elbow to keep Diana from moving towards Marco. Her teeth gritted and her deformed hands balled into fists.

“Diana, please.” Gary didn’t need to say anymore, because she turned and hobbled away.

It would be better for her blood pressure if she left Gary to deal with Marco, so she did just that. “I’ll be in Clarence’s office.” She knew Clarence would already be down, deep inside the bowels of the Nest, at work with the engineering and construction crew.

Gary looked after her for a moment and said, “No one’s disputing that, Marco. But right now, I need you to wait here while I sort things out. I will come get you shortly. I promise.”

Given no other choice, Marco relented and gave Gary a hesitant nod before he took a seat on a blanket-covered haystack, that served as the office couch.

“I’ll wait right here,” he grudgingly conceded.

“Thank you,” Gary replied, not unaware of Michelle’s displeasure for having left Marco there.

Gary thought that Michelle was one of the few people who actually liked Marco. If he had bothered to ask her, he would have discovered that she found him to be self-serving and constantly idling a bit too high on the testosterone spectrum.

Gary gave him a grateful smile and caught up with Diana, who, for a woman of an indeterminable advanced age, moved relatively fast. Gently, he took her arm and helped settle her in Clarence’s executive chair.

“Well, where do you want me to start?” Although she never mentioned it, the silence of her new home socked the wind out of her. She was used to being lulled by the cry of macaques, the call of macaws, the buzz of huge, alien-like insects, and the nightly smell of the sweet, warm rain that cascaded down on everything. Here, there was no rain, no atmosphere, just dust, sand, and lots of wind.

“First, I want to hear about Yesenia. We can go over inventory once Edward arrives.” He took out a handkerchief and wiped down his forehead. “How could I not see this?” In

the back of his mind, Gary took note that the wind had picked up outside. He ducked a bit to look out of the window at the night's sky. The stars remained visible—a good sign.

“You couldn't have known.” Diana rested her arms on her lap and kept her gaze on Gary. “None of us could.”

“What does Marco know?” Gary asked and saw Diana look towards the other room. Then she shook her head. “Oh, you are kidding me! Diana, this type of behavior could tear the Nest apart!” He stopped himself from saying more before she reminded him, once again, that humans were imperfect.

“Gary, it is what it is.”

“But it isn't, is it.” Gary ran his hands over his face. “Suicide? You went with suicide?”

Diana did not flinch. “I did. It is win-win. As far as Marco is concerned, she drowned.”

Christ, he thought. “Marco has no idea Yesenia is alive and involved with Steven?!”

“None whatsoever.”

Gary would rather deal with anything but a bizarre love triangle, and it showed. “So then, where is she?”

“San Francisco.” Calmly, Diana added the win-win part. “With her Biotech background and connections, she easily found a job with an international corporation... Zalt International.”

“Zalt?” Gary repeated with surprise in his voice. Zalt happened to be one of the most difficult multinationals to gain employment with. He knew that Yesenia had once worked with plant genetics, but he hadn't learned much more about her. Now he realized that he'd made a great mistake by accepting Marco's description of his wife's abilities. “Claudia once told me that Marco struck her as the kind of man that can't handle his wife's success.” In a sign of his frustration, he glanced back towards his office. Frustration had darkened his features. “I should have listened to her.”

“Your daughter may be young, but she is wise,” Diana said, with sincere admiration for Gary's youngest daughter. Diana knew Claudia as disciplined, focused, and goal oriented, all qualities she admired. “Gary, this is the best solution. Yesenia and Steven will move to SF, and Marco will have no choice but to move on. Not that he has not already.”

Gary flinched, but Diana had not noticed because the entire structure seemed to flinch with him. Gary froze for a second, drew back the yellowed coverings, and glanced out the window once more. The stars were gone, and so was the quarter moon that had hung there when he last looked out. He ran to the other window, just as the alarm sounded. The barn doors to the Nest's entrance were shuttered as soon as everyone on that side had gone safely below ground.

"Trust me, Diana!" Gary scooped her into his arms, just as Steven and Michelle ran in with Marco following close behind. Gary locked eyes with Steven, but only for a split second. "Down to the basement! Now!"

Steven and Marco temporarily put their dislike of each other aside and worked together to move the covered haystack Marco had been sitting on. Beneath it lay the door to the basement.

"Gary, I've got Diana," Steven said, as he reached to take her from him. He was younger and stronger, but she did not weigh more than a leaf.

"I've got her," Gary insisted. "Help Michelle grab the technol—" Everything went dark. "Marco, get down there and light the lamps!" Gary would not dare move in the dark with Diana in his arms.

In survival mode, Marco hurried and felt his way down the wooden stairs. Finally, he found a flashlight and soon lit the lamps. Meanwhile, Michelle and Steven ran around grabbing what they could.

The storm intensified.

"What is that?" Steven said as he stopped to look around. They were in the dark room and their hands were full of equipment. The sandblast grated so intensely that it sounded like something was ripped away. Then the shuttered windows whimpered and complained. "We better get down there. Now."

Six

December, 2029.

Plywood covered windows punctuated the economic deterioration of the neighborhood. Every other standing home in Reedley, California, was a microcosm of the nation's economic decline. Abandoned, the homes suffered from chronic dry rot and termites that ate away at their sun-bleached exteriors. Gutters, those still intact, were corroded and rusted, or fell away with the slightest hint of a breeze. Across the quaint town, dirt patches completely replaced green lawns.

Some of the abandoned homes served a new, higher purpose. Four adjacent blocks of abandoned homes had been strung together to make up a haphazard, yet well-run, medicinal greenhouse operation: Lazador's medicinal greenhouse operation. Hydroponic beds with Cordoncillo plants sat in four lines of fifteen throughout every room of the 1970s style, three-bedroom homes. The rooms were well-lit with plant lights that ran above the hydroponic growing beds. Growing beds covered every spare square-foot that hadn't been required to keep open as a walkway.

Diana's knotted hand gently held a Cordoncillo leaf. Her thumb moved from side to side and lightly skimmed the leaf's face. The feel of the veiny texture soothed her. Edward stood by her side and listened to every word she said. No one had more experience with medicinal plants than Diana.

"You have gotten better. These roots look healthy."

Edward nodded with appreciation. Aside from growing from seeds, he and his team worked over several months to master the plant propagation and plant grafting techniques she'd taught them. "Power outages and climate control are constant problems. The Nest's greenhouses have built-in, automated climate control and a constant power source." Or

so he had been told. “If all goes as planned, all medicinal plants will be relocated into the Nest within the next couple of weeks, which is really great because this humidity is killing me.” Humidifiers had been hung in each corner of the home to keep it balmy. The naturally scorching external temperatures kept everything hot. “I feel like I’m actually in the Amazon when I’m in here.”

What was discomforting for Edward felt like home for Diana.

“Well... Cordoncillo is an Amazonian native.” A longing look flickered in Diana’s eyes, but only for a split second. Edward had already noticed that the humid heat never affected her the way it did everyone else. She, like the Cordoncillo, seemed to thrive in it.

Cordoncillo, one of several medicinal plants brought back to the Nest from the Amazon, had been planted in every bed of the home they stood in. In fact, the home had been termed the Cordoncillo house. On the medicinal greenhouse map that hung off Gary’s office wall, the Cordoncillo house was found on the second block from the left, and the ninth home from the left, or L2L9. The plant, Cordoncillo, would serve Lazador as a form of anesthesia and pain medication. L2L10, the home immediately next door, known as the Pusangade house, grew Pusangade, an anti-anxiety aid. There were also L1L4, the Motelo house, for the anticoagulant shrub, L1L11, the Shapumvilla house, and L3L2 is the Tubocurarine house, and so on.

“I am happy. We have made quite a bit of progress.”

Edward walked behind Diana as she shuffled ahead and inspected his work. Unexpectedly, she stopped and shuffled around to face him. There was a trace of strain on her face as she forced the calcified curvature of her spine to give just enough for her to be able to look into his eyes. “Progress, Edward. Progress is what we must continually strive for, for the sake of the Nest... and its future.”

Edward nodded. He held no utopian romantic notions of life in the Nest. He understood the risks and the obstacles the Nest faced, which in turn, the population faced. One difficult fact of life was Lazador’s lack of access to medicines produced by the large conglomerates, not that Lazador’s residents would be able to afford them anyway. Lazador’s citizens only had themselves to rely on if they were to succeed as a society. And succeed they had to, because the alternative was not to exist at all.

Lazador, it was said amongst its members, would be an experiment in human resilience and Edward firmly believed that.

“I found him! I found him!” Jimmy rested his palms on his knees to catch his breath. Wide-eyed, he panted. His bellbottom pants rested well above his dirt-covered, pink ankles.

Intrigued by Jimmy’s excitement, Diana suppressed a smile and gave him her attention. The young man reminded her of Puck, from *A Mid-Summer Night’s Dream*. Jimmy saw that her mercurial eyes had settled on him and took an involuntary step back. Edward’s lips cracked into a warm smile. For all of Jimmy’s quirkiness, which included highwater pants that sometimes bordered on being too baggy and other times too tight, the boy was endearing. Jimmy’s endearment had yet to negate the fact that he was often times annoying.

“I tasked Jimmy with finding Marco. I just thought—” The disapproval on Diana’s face took Edward by surprise and caused his thoughts to scramble. He took a moment to swallow and moisten his throat, then said, “Well, I thought that since Marco is my counterpart in horticulture and agriculture, that he should be included, so that we have a secondary person.”

Jimmy visibly relaxed as soon as Diana turned her attention away from him and onto Edward. Now *Edward* wanted to take a step back.

Of course, it was logical that Edward would think to bring Marco into the conversation, Diana knew that he and Marco worked in tandem in the vertical greenhouses. Still, Diana had no interest in interacting with Marco directly. “I’d prefer,” Diana paused to gather her thoughts. She didn’t mind being blunt with Edward, but Jimmy was there and she didn’t need to get him involved. Finally choosing some tactful choice words, Diana said, “I would prefer it if *you* would fill him in later.”

“Gotcha,” Edward said, understanding enough to jump in and spare Diana from having to explain herself. “Of course. I’ll bring Marco up to speed.” Sweat ran down his back and felt like the light touch of fingers. A shiver escaped him. Reflexively, he cast a quick glance in the direction of the nearest window. It had been propped open, but gave no relief.

Jimmy had placed himself a step behind Diana and stood fidgeting. When Jimmy finally found the courage, he raised a finger to attract Edward's attention, but Edward ignored him.

"Then, let's proceed," Diana said firmly. She had yet to notice that Jimmy had moved himself directly behind her, to avoid her direct attention.

Once again, Jimmy raised a hand. When Edward failed to acknowledge him, he wiggled and flailed both arms. Annoyed by Jimmy, Edward continued to ignore him. Diana secretly monitored his reflection in the window and fought to suppress her laughter. Jimmy behaved as though he'd sat on an anthill.

"Let's proceed," Edward agreed, and turned his attention back to the plants.

Unable to contain himself any longer, and unwilling to continue to be ignored, Jimmy balled his fists and extended his arms straight down his sides. He appeared for the world like a frustrated child, not the sixteen-year-old that he was. Finally, he wailed, "Edward! No! You must come! I found him! They are fighting!"

Diana's deep-black eyes remained focused on the plants, but Edward saw them narrow as her mouth pulled tight. Rivulets of sweat matted Jimmy's red hair to his forehead and made him look as though he'd just walked out of a shower.

"You go deal with Marco and I'll get Gary," Diana said. Not waiting for a reply, she turned and hobbled off.

Edward nodded and looked to Jimmy to lead the way, but Jimmy had become entranced by Diana's knotted, gnarled fingers. He stared as she pulled a purple handkerchief from under her sleeve to dab the sweat off the nape of her neck. Having lost his patience, Edward flicked Jimmy's forehead with his index finger.

"Jimmy, where are they?!" Edward's cadence warned that he had become annoyed.

A bothered look came over Jimmy. There had been no need to flick him on the forehead. But then, something in his expression changed. He realized that Edward needed his help. Instantly, his own annoyance dissolved and a smile formed on his lips.

"This way," he said, in that I'm in charge voice that annoyed everyone who asked him for help, especially Mildred. With his back straight and chest proud, Jimmy pulled his headlamp out of his back pocket and placed it on his forehead. "Follow me," he commanded.

Edward rolled his eyes and shook his head. His own headlamp on, Edward followed Jimmy in stifled frustration.

Two blocks over from L2L9, at L4L4, on Hemp Row, across the street from what used to be Reedley's town park, there was a large patch of dirt. Two men, Steven and Marcos, were in that patch of dirt and they had each other in a headlock. Tired, they threw worn out punches with little impact on one another.

Edward's annoyance ticked up a few notches as soon as he noticed Moose and Mildred. They stood side by side, with their arms crossed as they watched the spectacle before them. Their amused expressions further soured Edward.

Grudgingly, Edward stepped into the fray and worked to pull the men apart. "That's enough!" He said, and grabbed them by their necks. The look of disapproval he gave Moose and Mildred wiped their smiles away. "Marco!" Edward warned. Marco was small but fast, and he had Edward going around and around as he clung to Steven and tried to pull him down. "Moose! A little help!"

Suppressing his amusement, Moose stepped in and wrapped his girth around Marco. It took a tight bearhug from Moose to get Marco to finally stop. When Moose heard Marco wheeze, he grinned internally and released some of the pressure.

"What in the hell is going on here?" Edward demanded to know as he struggled unsuccessfully to pull Steven's arms away from Marco.

The amateur, overaged pugilists still clung to each other, but only barely. Marco had a fistful of Steven's shirt, and Steven had Marco's arm. Luckily, both men had spent their energy and could barely swing at each other. Instead, they compensated by trying to pull the other down. This is ridiculous, Edward thought to himself.

"Moose! I cannot breathe!" Moose kept Marco in an iron clasped bearhug. "Moose!"

"Your fault." Moose had tried to release Marco, but then he charged at Steven. Luckily, Moose had been ready for him and tightened his grip, just in time for Marco's fist to cut the air between them. For his part, Edward kept his hand on Steven's shoulder, ready to squeeze and pull him back, if necessary.

"What is this? Aren't you two too old for this kind of behavior?"

"Marco is the one who—" Edward couldn't hear what Steven said, because Marco jumped in and tried to tell his side of the story.

Moose and Edward exchanged annoyed glances. Mildred smirked and shook her head. But Jimmy, he slapped his knee and laughed out loud; he switched to a cough when Edward shot daggers at him with a stare. Meanwhile, Marco and Steven began talking louder, trying to drown the other out.

“Enough!” Edward pulled Steven back and made him let go of Marco’s arm.

Moose tightened his grip on Marco and yanked his hand off Steven’s shirt. “I think it’s best if you both just shut up already.”

Mildred’s headlamp moved up and down a couple of times with her approving nod. “Mildred, you’re blinding everyone with your headlamp.” Annoyed, Edward gave Jimmy a visual cue to remove his as well. “Moose... why don’t you try telling me what happened.”

Moose shrugged with genuine confusion. “Not sure how or what started it.” Marco tried to speak, but Moose squeezed the wind out of him, making him squeal. Confident Marco would remain quiet, he temporarily released a big ham-hand from around Marco to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Then he said, “We were working on trimming, like you said to do,” his breathing was labored from the effort as he spoke, “when Marco stormed in and took Steven out the front door by his shirt. From there, the two just went at it. By the time I ran out, they were already rolling around on the ground.” Moose turned his head so that Edward could see his bruised jaw, though it was too dark outside for him to properly see anything. “I tried to step in and stop the fight, but I gave up when I took one in the jaw. After that, I figured it is their stupid issue, whatever it is. There’s no need for me to get all beat up over it.”

Mildred gave Moose another curt nod. This time, her headlamp was hanging out of her front pocket by the strap. If anyone were to pass by, which was an extremely low probability since Reedley was an out of the way town and was considered abandoned by the Government and the Census Bureau, they would see total darkness in every which direction—except for the four flashlights, waist high, pointing at the ground.

During disjuncting episodes, such as the one he presently found himself in—playing referee between two grown men—Edward wondered how he’d arrived there. How different would his life have been if he hadn’t lost his Hedge Fund Manager position to an artificially intelligent advisor? A machine that quantified risk, balanced a portfolio,

and had consistently higher rates of return than any human could hope to achieve! If technology and global warming hadn't destroyed the existing way of life, he'd still have sixty-hour work weeks, and he wouldn't be wasting his time with the absurdity of two grown men fighting.

"He was sleeping with my wife!" Marco said the words through his teeth.

Edward's attention had been floating in a peripheral world created by his mind, imagining what could have been, until his ears picked up the accusation Marco had leveled at Steven. Edward felt his thoughts get crudely yanked back to reality.

"What did you say?" Edward asked Marco, while looking to Steven for his reaction.

Mildred pushed her glasses up her nose, but made no other effort to hide her shock. Moose snickered some comment about ridiculous rumors.

"I didn't choose to fall in love with her!" Steven declared in self-defense against Marco, before realizing that doing so had confirmed Marco's accusation to his closest friends. That is not how he had wanted them to find out.

Feeling vindicated, Marco puffed up his chest and pushed and shoved against Moose's iron embrace. He had come there on a hunch, and he had been proven right. "She was my wife! She was not for you to love!" Marco cycled from anger to victimhood before their eyes, but only Mildred expressed any empathy for him.

Marco's pity party made Steven's blood boil. "You! You are not a victim! Yesenia is a victim... Jack was a victim... both are your victims!" Steven received an unexpected dose of pleasure when Marco's expression registered shock. "What? You thought no one would ever find out about your infidelity." He shook his head and said, "You're a slime bucket. Yesenia had every right to seek out and find true love."

Marco's jaw tightened and he tried to lunge at Steven, only this time Mildred got between them. Her threatening posture dared him to go through her. Their eyes locked. Marco seemed to be weighing the good will remaining towards him. He had lost Mildred. How could he not? She and Yesenia were close friends. He never had Edward's good will, not when the choice was between himself and Steven. Moose still seemed to be on his side. And Jimmy, well, Jimmy was afraid of Marco. It appeared that he only held on to Moose's goodwill.

“You’re an opportunist.” Moose hadn’t locked Marco’s forearm down with his embrace, which allowed him some freedom to waive an accusatory finger at Steven. “You... you told her what she needed to hear, just so you could have your way with her.” It wasn’t exactly a denial of his infidelity, but he hoped it would be taken as such. There was no proof he’d cheated on his wife, at least none that they had.

“Marco,” Steven had had enough. “I didn’t have to say a word to Yesenia. She saw you in the shed with that widow... Ivan’s friend... Martha.” He shook his head with complete disgust.

Mildred whirled around to face Marco. Edward saw her search his face for signs that Steven had told the truth. The disappointment that reconfigured her face signaled that she had found it. “Despicable behavior,” she whispered, but Edward heard it. He agreed with her.

Pushing Edward’s hands away, Steven said, “Don’t bother trying to change the narrative, Marco. Yesenia walked into that river because she preferred death over the humiliation of your betrayal.” Twisting the knife deeper, he said, “How does it feel to be responsible for two suicides?”

The accusation had the desired effect. The punch was a knockout. All eyes were on Marco; their warmth gone. Marco saw no friend amongst them.

Sobbing, Marco collapsed to the ground and sat there, whimpering. No one stepped forward to console him. “She knew?” He asked. Then, he looked up to Steven, whom he knew had been with her just before she died. “Please tell me she didn’t suffer.”

Incredulous, Steven shook his head. “You must really be delusional if you think that I am going to assuage your conscience. Of course, she suffered, you miserable bastard!” He kicked a boot full of dirt towards the defeated man and stalked off.

Jimmy had been about to say something, but Edward instinctively reached back and took a fistful of his shirt. Jimmy caught himself and decided against the inappropriate joke he had been about to make.

“Jimmy, do not speak. Just go and get back to work. Show is over. Everyone back to work!” He said it loud enough for Moose and Mildred to hear, then walked off in the direction Steven had gone.

“Wow!” Mildred stood over Marco, who was still on the floor, sniffing. “I sure wish I hadn’t just heard all that about you, Marco.” Unsympathetic, she looked down her nose at the sniveling man as she pushed up her glasses. “I don’t think I like you much, anymore.” She turned and stalked away. Disgusted.

Moose did not bother with Marco. The man was already about as low as he could go, so he joined Mildred and left him in his miserable state.

Edward found Steven sitting on the bed of Gary’s truck, parked outside of L3L12. He had just popped the cap off a homebrewed oat beer. When he approached, Steven handed him the opened beer and fished for another in the ice chest Gary kept in the back of his truck.

“I never liked Marco,” Steven said, bringing the bottle to his lips and taking a pull.

They were outside the Pepto house. The plywood covered windows masked the light emitted by the hundreds of plant lights that kept the inside as brightly lit as sunlight at high noon. Edward suspected that Gary and Diana were inside, most likely locked in a heated debate about how to handle the Steven-Marco rift. He couldn’t know that a solution had already been arranged.

“What am I missing?” Edward asked, looking towards the house. “This feels bigger than it should be. It happened. Marco is now living with Martha. Yesenia is dead... sorry. I am sorry. That was callous, but I feel like there is more going on here.”

Steven’s mouth twisted in contemplation. After summoning and expelling a deep breath, he said, “There is.” Steven hesitated, glanced up at the Pepto house then back at Edward. “More going on here. Yesenia is alive.” Edward had clearly not expected that.

“She... where is she?”

Once again, Steven’s lips contorted, a giveaway that he was weighing how much to say. “She is in SF. She got a job with Zalt Industries—”

“Oh,” Edward said, finally piecing things together. “Now things are making sense.” Steven had been absent a lot since he returned from the Amazon, and Diana always came around with a ready excuse. Fixing his eyes on the darkness that colored the night, Edward felt the doors to his heart open to let the sadness come in.

“Yeah.” Steven sipped his beer. He had fallen in love with Yesenia the day he set eyes on her.

“So,” Edward’s heavy heart sounded out in his voice, “I imagine you’ll be leaving us to join her.” Steven had become his best friend; the person he could speak to freely; the one he could say anything to without fear of being judged. In the short time they’d known each other, Edward had come to rely on Steven, and the rest of his team, as though they were his family. In fact, they were the only family he had left. Edward’s father died of a heart attack while he was still in college, and his mother passed away from Alzheimer’s disease last year. He had no siblings and he never got to know his aunts, uncles, or cousins.

Steven saw no point in denying it; besides, he didn’t want to lie to Edward. “I think it would be best if I left tonight.”

Edward bit his lip. “Steven, you’re the best at what we do.”

“No, Edward. You are the best at what we do. That is why Gary put you in charge. You can graft and propagate better than I can. And you have a better grasp on Eastern and Indigenous medicines than I do.” That wasn’t true, and they both knew it, but Edward remained quiet on the point, aware that Steven’s mind had been made up.

“Will I be able to reach you... if I have questions?”

Steven shifted his feet. “It will be up to Gary as to what relationship we’re allowed to have with Lazador.”

Seven

2034.

Teased to a height that added a full inch to Zachary's stature, the poof of golden locks had been expertly constructed to hide his much too prematurely retreated hairline. The spiraling wrap was held captive atop his head by an arsenal of aerosol glue that forbade stray wayward hairs.

Approvingly, his inset, beady blue eyes studied his weak chin and sharp nose in the mirror's reflection. Since his unprecedented ascent to power, appearance had become monumentally important to him. A global figure such as himself, a man of substantial wealth who sat at the head of the largest multinational conglomeration, couldn't go around looking like a penurious popper. Perception was everything to his delicate ego.

Focused on his new haircut, Zachary tilted his head from side to side.

"Artur," Zachary said. He let go of his own image to face his personal assistant, who explained that the barricades that prevented people from reaching the San Francisco SunSafe had resulted in refugee camps springing up around them. "I do not care. The barricades stay in place. People will have to wait their turn to get into the SunSafe... where they wait is not my concern, so long as it is not inside *my* SunSafes." Homeless encampments had become an issue at every SunSafe border.

Clean-cut and gangly, Artur grimaced when Zachary said "*my* SunSafes." After ten years of working as Zachary's assistant, Artur still assiduously abhorred his boss.

Artur had been there when lower-bid contractors had been sidelined in order to grant all SunSafe contracts to Zarant Industries, when all available tax payer resources had been appropriated for construction of nine initial SunSafes: Austin, Seattle, Los Angeles, Miami, Nashville, San Diego, Colorado, New York, and San Francisco. Overnight,

Zachary had become the wealthiest and most powerful person in the world. What Artur feared most had manifested: The U.S. Government had contracted the SunSafe construction and management out to Zarant Industries, which immediately granted Zachary de facto governing control. The worst, Artur suspected, would come once no one remained to check Zarant's power. He knew that day would not be far off, now that they controlled a fleet of satellites that rivaled the U.S. Military's tracking capabilities. Who could oppose it? The final piece of power would come to Zachary if the U.S. Government followed through with Lila Duarte's proposal to privatize the U.S. Military. That would be game over. The multinationals would own the world and Zachary's Zarant Industries would be on top.

Of the nine SunSafes planned, only six were in the process of being fully constructed. New York's SunSafe could never be built. Rising sea levels doomed it before the design concept had been completed. It would have been the largest and most populous SunSafe in the country. Construction on two other SunSafes had to be abandoned. Miami's SunSafe collapsed into a sinkhole as construction began, and parts of Nashville's SunSafe were toppled over by successive tornadoes. Hundreds of thousands of would-be residents were left exposed to disease and the elements. Frustratingly, Zachary's avarice, coupled with his aversion to housing the poor inside of his SunSafes, resulted in a multitude of intentional delays that triggered an unprecedented domestic refugee crisis within the country's borders. Consequently, millions more Americans had been added to the death toll.

Artur did his best to check his anger. Zachary's personal stylist disappeared after having intimated that Zachary was a cruel dictator. Artur had a wife and two daughters to worry about, but it was increasingly difficult to hold his tongue—the man had already repeatedly confirmed that he was altogether void of a soul.

"Sir, if I may." Zachary harrumphed and grumbled something unintelligible. Artur dared to continue. "The encampment populations," Artur began. His arched right eyebrow was an involuntary anatomic response to the brooding anger in Zachary's eyes. The term Artur wanted to use, the term he should use, was "refugee camp", but as of the prior week, the term had been outlawed. "They are experiencing high rates of disease and mortality." According to the report he had read that morning from HHS, Typhus, Hepatitis and E.

coli outbreaks were the most common health problems plaguing them, after malnutrition and dehydration. “We can provide some relief if we provide food, water, perhaps toilets and antibiotics. Perhaps some tents? Most are currently living beneath bed sheets, which are no match for the heat.”

“That’s what government is for,” Zachary snapped and continued to inspect his reflection in the mirror. It was time to rid himself of Artur. General Garret would have to take care of it. Before Zachary could solidify his decision, he knew that Garret would push back and demand a valid reason. It annoyed Zachary that Garret never did as he was told. He always had too many questions.

Oblivious of the contempt Zachary felt for him, Artur sat in one of the two office chairs without asking for permission. Zachary seethed.

“Sir, the government is the one asking us to help.” Artur shook his head as the word ‘government’ left his mouth. The word no longer held any real meaning.

When Automation and Artificial Intelligence weened the market economy of its need for human labor, they cutoff Treasury’s income stream. Multinationals used their windfall wealth to buy competitors and monopolize. Government, in every respect, was diminished. Artur believed that once Zachary completed the SunSafes, he would hold enough concentrated wealth and power to fully castrate the U.S. Government of its remaining wisps of power.

“Change the subject.” Zachary said, brushing back a couple of imaginary loose hairs. “We cannot afford such frivolities. We are charged with building a shelter to ensure the human race survives the global catastrophe that is global warming.” Zachary spoke as though he actually cared about global warming and was trying to do something about it. Artur saw through him and listened without showing emotion. He’d been around Zachary long enough to know he regularly leveraged the climate crisis to gather more power and excuse his behavior. Biting his bottom lip, Artur pretended to listen as Zachary said, “Our mandate supersedes the loss of a few lives.”

Mandate? There was no such thing. There was an ill begotten multitrillion-dollar contract. That was all.

Their discussion took place in the One Building, the global pinnacle of wealth, located in the east side of the SF SunSafe. Built for the global elite, the One Building made the

Salesforce Tower look like a shanty town in its heyday. Zachary's private penthouse took up the top three floors of the One Building. From his perspective, saving the lives of Americans belonging to the lower wealth spectrum was wasteful. Why bother when they would only become financial burdens to his interests?

Changing the subject, Artur swallowed his anger and said, "Sir, Mrs. Elizabeth," *your wife*, he wanted to add every time. Zachary never seemed to remember that Elizabeth was the wife and Lila was the mistress. "She has not left her bedroom in over a week. Would you like me to have someone check on her?" Artur knew what his answer would be: No. Some of the staff, a group Artur identified with, believed Zachary secretly hoped his wife would just overdose and die already. The only thing he ever concerned himself with was to make certain Elizabeth had plenty of pills sitting on her nightstand.

A standing order from Zachary established the rule that Elizabeth was never to be disturbed once she was in her bedroom. After Star's birth, Zachary and Elizabeth's daughter, Elizabeth became a recluse. Some cruelly gossiped that it happened because she birthed the Devil's spawn. Whatever the reason, the birth of Star left behind a shell of the woman. To help cope, Elizabeth took to self-medicating with unidentified, colorful little pills that helped her get through the emotional baggage she hauled around—Zachary's constant gaslighting.

To the astonishment of those who knew Elizabeth, Lila amongst them, the meager, insecure being that now occupied her body had swallowed up all vestiges of the strong, proud woman that once resided there. In the span of eleven years, Zachary had taken a majestic Redwood and whittled it down to a brittle toothpick.

"Elizabeth is a grown woman. She doesn't require you, or anyone, to check on her."

Artur nodded. He knew the rules, but had to ask. One day, they were going to discover her decomposing body in her bed, and Artur was not going to take responsibility for it. "Moving on, Amanda Cortez has been apprehended." There was no pleasure in his conveyance of the news, even though she counted as one of Zarant's Ten Most Wanted people.

The most recent plague that swept through global populations became the impetus, or rather the justification, for the complete automation of blue- and white-collar jobs. As

nations closed their borders, so did the individual states, making the interstate transport of food impossible. Enter Amanda.

Amanda Cortez had the brilliant idea of acquiring the failed retail parks, malls, and other public spaces throughout the southernmost U.S. states. She paid pennies on the dollar to owners eager to dump the properties for anything at all. One by one, they were cored out and relieved of their retail interiors, then repurposed as urban hydroponic and urban farms. She singlehandedly converted food deserts into fresh food cornucopias and brought jobs back to communities.

The concept had been brilliant. There were low transport costs, the carbon footprint was small, and most importantly, chunks of reskilled local labor were employed. Amanda's urban, vertical farms threaded the unemployed citizens back into the fabric of their community as "technical urban farmers."

Urban farms gradually became a beacon of hope for progressive politicians who did not believe that global warming had to force everyone into the SunSafes. The urban farm's ability to feed local populations with few resources ignited a political movement. Politicians argued that communities could survive if they changed their behavior. They advocated for a nocturnal way of life: sleep during the day's hottest hours and come out at night. Local food propagation. They also advocated for the deceleration of technological advances in the global economy to keep people employed. But primarily, they advocated against the construction of the SunSafes, fearing the power grab by Zarent Industries and other multinationals.

To opponents of the SunSafes, Amanda Cortez was a visionary. She was not just the urban farm founder, but also an angel investor in RASTRO Industries, whose CEO, Kenneth Montes, an icon in the philanthropic world, was working on a top-secret project called the Artificial Respirator. An AR is a machine the size of a house that respires air the way a tree does, converting carbon dioxide into oxygen. It was rumored that one AR had the capability to respire at the rate of thousands of trees daily.

To Zachary's ire, Amanda had been granted an audience with the House Appropriations Committee. To his infuriated astonishment, she had nearly succeeded in redirecting the funds earmarked for his SunSafes to Kenneth's ARs. Without interception, RASTRO's ARs would have nullified the need for his SunSafes. The AR, if Amanda and

Kenneth were to be believed, would begin to reverse the worst effects of global warming within a span of fifty years, putting into question the long-term need for his SunSafes. Zachary had been desperate. The SunSafes had to be built and the people had to become reliant on them; without that, he would never have been able to subjugate the U.S. Government.

Thankfully, Lila, who chaired the committee, succeeded in raising enough doubt in the AR technology. Putting forth questions about RASTRO's guaranteed success, a standard she made sure Zarrant was not subjected to when proposing the SunSafes as mankind's saviors, it was Lila who kept the tide flowing in Zachary's favor.

"Finally, good news." Amanda was a liability he couldn't risk. "Great news!"

Artur gratuitously nodded, as if he were actually listening. Tired, he turned to the window. Like bars on a graph, tall, white, lead-laced glass high-rise buildings jutted out from below. The ground was too far down to see from their height, but he could see the construction cranes in the distance, expanding Zachary's fiefdom into the horizon.

"I want Amanda thrown into a cell and left there to rot." She had eluded capture for nearly a decade and had made a fool of him, telling anyone who would listen about the long forgotten ARs. She even incited mobs to riot against him and his interests. "And tell the guards I want her unharmed until I question her. After that, they can make her disappear for all I care."

If anyone knew where Kenneth Montes hid those prototype ARs, Amanda would. Zachary needed those ARs in his sole possession to achieve his ultimate goal—his Glassdome.

With a stark blink of the eyes and shake of the head, Artur said, "Sir, I don't think we can just make people disappear. At least not legally."

The stupidity his assistant exercised angered Zachary profoundly. Zachary moved and stood shoulder to shoulder with Artur, aware of how easily he could be intimidated. Basking in his power over Artur, Zachary turned his piercing blue eyes on him and said, "Artur, look out there and tell me what you see." Zachary grinned when he saw Artur swallow hard.

Unsure what he was asking, Artur replied, "The SunSafe."

Zachary gave a slight nod of approval and Artur allowed himself to breathe again. “Sometimes, you’re smarter than you look.” Artur shuffled his feet and bit his tongue. “Now, how many of the government buildings are bigger than the One Building?”

Artur’s brow furrowed. It had to be a trick question. “Sir, there are no government buildings in the SunSafe.” According to the blueprints, government office buildings would be the last to be built. Why? Because, Zachary argued, politicians serve at the people’s pleasure, and so, if they were to remain in touch with their constituency, they must remain with the people. It was a ploy to buy enough time to consolidate his power, and either bring the politicians in line, or redline them entirely from *his* SunSafes.

The corner of Zachary’s lips twitched upwards, for only a split second. The shock on Artur’s face was proof enough that he’d made his point. Inside the SunSafe, Zachary’s word was final. It was why he would never allow competing powers to exist, be it government or individuals, such as Miss Amanda Cortez.

“Excellent.” Zachary glanced at his watch. “That will be all, Artur.” Satisfied with himself, Zachary returned to his mirror. “Actually—”

Artur pretended he did not hear him and scurried out the door.

Zachary stalked to his desk, searched the top drawer for a hand-held mirror, grumbling until he confirmed what he’d found earlier, before Artur had interrupted him. He held up the handheld mirror in order to see the back of his own head. So far, the haircut looked good. As he turned his head, an arrogant smile of approval appropriated his lips for a brief moment, before it suddenly slipped away. There! His signature hair-swoosh was flawed. The barber had clearly taken too much off the length, ending its traditional wrap abruptly, just past his right ear. The bald spot was visible!

Annoyed, Zachary wondered how difficult it would be to automate the hair industry. Unfortunately, there had to be a pause in automation until he dealt with the blowback his automation of the nursing industry had triggered. Of all of the jobs eliminated by Artificial Intelligence, the medical field had shown the most resistance.

The medical industry may not accept its fate, but he wasn’t going to back down. He’d fought the same battle before and won every time, in the name of progress (and profits). Besides, NRS2s, or humanoid nurses, had proven to be cash cows. Their introduction into the marketplace eliminated reliance on costly nurses, who required costly educations, and

belonged to costly unions. They also eliminated reliance on phlebotomists and labs and pharmacies. NRS2s could draw blood and analyze it on the spot, after which a car-sized pharmacy, called Autopharma, dispensed the prescription by scanning a receiver's retina.

Zachary ran a hand over his clean-shaven chin. Society, Zachary decided, lacked foresight.

Brrrrd.... Brrrrd.

He turned his attention to his desk. A vertical, blue holographic rectangle was projected eight inches above his desktop—his secretary's avatar.

"Mark!"

"Sir." Mark's likeness, from the shoulders up, appeared in hologram form. When it did not find Zachary behind his desk, it rotated until it found him across the room, standing before the mirror. "General Garret has arrived."

"Excellent." Zachary grumbled. He had summoned Garret to his office nearly two hours ago. He set his jaw and narrowed his eyes as he stood before the intricately carved, gold-leafed mirror, attempting his best impression of a "power" look.

Mark waited patiently for Zachary's response. Inwardly, he detested his boss, considered him a disease, a cancer on the helpless people of the country, maybe even the world. Outwardly, he was professional and submissive, doing whatever it took to keep his job, and thus his life.

"Send him in," Zachary finally said, maintaining his power look, adding a pucker of the lips as he straightened his coat and gave his reflection an approving nod.

"Yes, sir," Mark said, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. Every time he saw Zachary give that "I'm in charge" look with that pucker of the lips, all he wanted to do was stick a Twinkie into his pie hole and smash it in with his fist.

An engineer by trade, Mark thought he would be high-flying in the technology world, creating things that would help mankind, maybe even save the planet. Unfortunately, he was born too late. By the time he graduated, only four months ago, with a Master's degree in engineering, global climate had reached an irreversible state of collapse, as had the global economy. The responsibility of both has been laid at the foot of irresponsible environmental deregulation, cronyism, automation and AI, and global market

consolidation, according to once prominent economists who have been “mysteriously” disappearing.

Labeling and assigning blame did not help those of Mark’s generation. They inherited a world of record-high unemployment, twice that of the Great Depression, and even higher within the small, historically marginalized populations. Communities existing outside of the SunSafe had it much worse. How much worse was impossible to know, since Zachary cut off all communication between the SunSafe residents and the outside world.

After university, Mark had three choices: become a rebel and “fight the power” of the multinationals; join the unemployment rolls and languish in utter poverty; or accept the deprecating job offered to him as the nephew of a higher up within Zarant’s ranks.

Power-look still intact, Zachary went to his desk and took his seat.

“Zachary.” General Garret, the head of Zarant’s Private Military, a consortium that was slowly replacing government-sponsored militaries around the world, entered. He was a strikingly handsome man, poached from the Navy Seals. His arms were made of mountain ranges smashed together, and he strode as erect as a board—chest proud, head high. “We tracked the two Russians to an underground community in the Appalachian foothills.” He omitted the part about the extensive network of tunnels they discovered that went deep into the mountain.

Zachary’s jaw twitched. “Bring me the Russians, and destroy that community.”

“Consider it done, Sir,” Garret said affirmatively, with absolutely no intention of carrying out the order. In his humane universe, there was absolutely no reason to destroy an underground community full of innocent people. Lucky for him, he’d learned early on that it was better to nod and agree, and do exactly the opposite from what Zachary demanded. Guardrail. He knew that he was protecting what remained of the Nation by behaving as Zachary’s guardrail, by muting his worst impulses where possible.

“They think they can live in their caves and skirt...”

Garret stopped listening. He despised Zachary, but he did as much as he had to, for the sake of the people he’d sworn to protect.

Zachary was after two Russians who had developed a technology that he wanted. From what Garret understood, it was a transporter that could Transport objects, and if rumor

could be believed, it would soon Transport humans from one location to another in a span of a few seconds. Something about radio waves and gamma rays and other physics he didn't quite understand.

He wasn't sure if he believed it, but he understood why Zachary would want it. People needed a new, safer way to travel since airplanes, ships, and automobiles weren't performing too well under the current elements. The sky had become a patchwork of unstable air masses, agitating against each other, and in the process, tossing airplanes about like ping-pong balls propelled by a bed of varying pressured air guns. Ships were not faring any better. Storms of biblical proportion formed over the oceans, worked them into a frenzy, displaced air and water, created bigger and bigger waves that chopped the water like a piranha feeding frenzy. Helpless, ships rolled and tossed until they snapped. Driving had its own set of risks.

"General!" General Garret stood in response to Zachary's tone. A displeased expression sat flatly on Zachary's face. "General, are you listening?!" He would not be ignored, not that he would know what to do about it. General Garret remained one of the few men Zachary actually feared.

He hadn't realized he'd drifted off with his thoughts. Standing to meet Zachary's eyes, Garret bested Zachary's height by nearly a head, which forced Zachary to shift his eyes upward.

"Yes, Sir."

"Good." Zachary readily accepted his answer.

Garret suppressed a smirk and subconsciously flexed his muscles until he felt the shirt seams around his arms threaten to burst against the pressure. For once, Garret was glad he wore a jacket. As insecure as Zachary was, he would not have taken lightly to the exposition of Garret's raw strength.

"I will take care of it." Garret's answer seemed to appease Zachary, though he had no idea what he was supposed to be taking care of. It had to have something to do with the two engineers. Ah, what should he do with the Russians? He couldn't very well hand them over to Zachary, who would hoard the technology. An old friend, Gary, popped into his thoughts. Garret wondered whether Gary still checked his pager for messages. He decided he had to reach out.

As a military man, Garret never disobeyed an order, not from an honorable man. Zachary, however, was the antithesis to honorable. He was a liar, a cheat, a narcissist, and his decisions were formed by his greed and unsubstantiated sense of superiority. Until recently, Garret had believed that his presence girded Zachary's worse impulses. Central America changed that. Had he suspected those were not vaccines, he would not have carried out the order.

"Anything on those Artificial Respirators?"

Again, with those respirators. Garret needed to figure out why Zachary was so dogged about locating them.

"We have Amanda Cortez in custody. I will be questioning her shortly."

"I expect a full report on my desk by tonight. You are dismissed, General."

"Yes, Sir," General Garret said, with a touch of sarcasm, and left without saying another word.

With puckered lips and a consternation-rippled forehead, Zachary strode back to his mirror. The bald patch would be a problem. It was not big, but it was visible. His overzealous, dolt of a hairstylist screwed up! The Paparazzi would have a field day with his hair. If he could weed every journalist out of his SunSafe he would do it, but it was too much like whack-a-mole—get one and another rears his head.

The media cleverly tied catchy titles condemning his business practices with his hair. They became so good at it that Zachary internalized it and became neurotically self-conscious over his appearance. Headlines such as "Billionaire Needs More Toupees, Cuts Employees by Two-Thirds at Newly Acquired Banks," "Unstoppable Hairpiece: Attorney General OKs Zarrant-Zalt Merger," "Shock Doctrine Hairpiece Privatizes Cyclone Devastated Jakarta Public School System," and "Piranhas Hairpiece Gobbling up South American Firms" spread through his SunSafes like wildfire.

The thought made his blood boil.

Zachary's recent venture, where he acquired, consolidated, and streamlined the failing financial industry, made him target number one. In order to meet his fiduciary responsibility to his investors, he squeezed every last penny from his investment by eliminating redundancies. For the sake of streamlining, humans were replaced with artificially intelligent machines that improved risk mitigation, provided continuity, and

gave a consistently higher rate of return. Also, the long-term savings of converting to AI outweighed the high initial cost.

Alone in his office, Zachary spoke to his reflection in the mirror. “People are too dumb to understand that it’s just business... smart business. Besides, first and foremost, I am a CEO. I have a fiduciary responsibility to my investors, not to any specific labor market, consumer, or country. That’s the way it has always been, and the way it always will be, for as long as I can help it.” Having soothed himself, Zachary moved to the window to admire *his* SunSafe, but when he saw his own reflection in the window, he thought of his bald spot. “This won’t do.”

Zachary turned and went to his desk. A small holographic keypad popped on above the desktop. Impatiently, he counted two seconds before his assistant’s image appeared.

“Yes, Sir?” Mark immediately sensed his boss’s sour mood, took a deep breath, and forced a minimal smile.

“Mark, I want Arnold fired.”

“Of course, Sir,” The words automatically fell out of his mouth as he worked to maintain the smile. He knew better than to query the order. Refraining from comment, he mentally rummaged through his mental rolodex of potential replacements—it was a short list. Zachary was notorious amongst the staff. He was cruel and had been known to make a couple of them “disappear.” “Yes, Sir. Right away.” Mark already dreaded the chore of releasing poor Arnold, who had been about to hit his six-month anniversary as Zachary’s personal stylist. Six months would have been the longest anyone had ever held that position.

Mark knew exactly how the sequence of events would unfold. Arnold would first be shocked. He’d have no clue as to what he’d done to deserve the dismissal and would plead for a second chance. Mark would then be forced to explain that a second chance was out of the question. At which point, Arnold’s emotions would morph from insulted to incensed and he would become belligerent. This was the worst part for Mark. If he couldn’t calm Arnold down, Zachary would most likely have him cast out of the SunSafe altogether.

“Sir,” Mark cleared his throat. “Senator Duarte just sent a message. She would like to speak with you,” he added as the text appeared before him. “She says it’s urgent.”

Zachary contemplated ignoring Lila's message before changing his mind. The last time he ignored her, he paid dearly. She used her power to delay a contract ratification by the Senate Appropriations Committee, and it cost him millions.

"Get her on the line," Zachary ordered and disengaged the call without waiting for a confirmation.

Subconscious about his appearance, he went back to the mirror, adjusted his tie, and gave himself another onceover before he retook his seat. The call came through.

"Lila," he said the instant her hologram appeared, her black hair was pulled into a neat bun.

"Zack," she said with a tone and a scowl that conveyed cold disapproval. "I'm on my way up to your office." Zachary could see her in his lobby, walking into the elevator. "This is very important and I don't want to discuss it over the phone."

Zachary's heart felt as though it jumped off a cliff, and his brain's neurons began blasting about, trying to ascertain the reason for her unannounced visit. It could be anything: the diluted AIDS treatments, Central American Ebola, the intentional redlining of certain income spectrums into the SF SunSafe. He began getting hot around the collar.

"Lila, Elizabeth might—" She was in the elevator. A chime rapidly announced each floor climbed.

"We both know that Elizabeth is in some self-medicated stupor right now."

Irritated by the verbal slap down she dealt him, Zachary clenched his jaw and grumbled. Ultimately, he had no choice but to acquiesce and show her his submission with a defeated nod of the head.

Their relationship had evolved into a combative love-hate relationship. Lila resented him for marrying Elizabeth, but could not overcome her addiction to him. One of Zachary's greatest charms was that he was as driven as she was, possibly more. From their first date she knew he would be her perfect counterpart in the corporate world. As she expected, he'd made them both wealthier than she could ever have imagined, and he was such a ravenous lover that he always left her pining for more. Zachary, on the other hand, was both in love and afraid of Lila. She was strong and bold and a narcissist, like him. That he did what had to be done to gain a step up never bothered her. What vexed her and made her a dangerous enemy was being excluded, handled, or manipulated; which

was why she knew every intimate detail about his dubious business practices. Well, nearly every detail.

“Stop your pouting, Zack. The hybrid Ebola virus your labs engineered and released in Central America! How could you jeopardize me and my reputation this way?!”

It was beyond infuriating for Zachary to have expended so much energy trying to keep that information from Lila, only for her to find out anyway. How in the hell! Zachary debated with himself whether to come clean or not. The problem came down to the fact that he loved her, but he couldn’t bring himself to trust that she wouldn’t become vindictive. She knew everything about him, and if she ever turned on him, something like the Central American genocide would absolutely jeopardize his future plans. He couldn’t take risks with people turning on him until he had the reins of power in his hands. For now, he would need to placate Lila and deny as much as possible.

Dreading his current situation, Zachary closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “I’ll let Mark know to let you right in.”

The elevator doors sprang open.

“No need. I am here and he’s already on his feet walking me to your office.”

The line cut off, the door swung open, and Lila stormed in.

“Can I get you something to drink, Senator?”

“No, Mark. Thank you.” It took every bit of effort she could muster to govern her temper in Mark’s presence. An internal anger wanted her to reach across the room and claw Zachary’s heart out, just to see if he had one.

Mark gave a slight head tilt to acknowledge Lila before he chanced a glance at Zachary. The spectacle of fear on Zachary’s face brightened Mark’s day.

When Mark turned to leave, Lila said, “Please close the door on your way out and see that we are not interrupted.” With a few strides she covered the room and sat in the chair opposite Zachary. Her jet-black eyes bore holes into Zachary’s confidence.

In a miscalculated effort to strip Lila of her anger, Zachary attempted to seduce her. With hunger in his eyes, he allowed them to travel over her form, from legs to breasts to face. But when his eyes arrived onto hers, he realized he had made a grave error.

“What the fuck are you doing?! Who the hell do you think you are?!”

“What do you mean what the fuck am I doing? I am in my fucking office getting ready for a meeting with the Secretary of Defense.” Zachary placed his clasped hands in his lap and leaned back, fully aware that his calm demeanor further fed her fury.

Lila took two deep breaths to calm herself and keep from reaching across the desk and castrating him right then and there. Instead, she too sat back and regarded him with a matched calmness until he began to squirm in his seat.

“Lila—”

“Stop. I do not need you to say it.” They both knew she had to maintain some degree of deniability. “You do not make moves like that without first giving me some kind of heads-up. I can’t provide you cover if I’m blindsided.” As much as Lila loved Zachary, she didn’t trust him. What nipped at her was why he bothered at all with Central America? What could he possibly gain from the genocide? Had his reasoning truly been as petty as retaliation? And why in the hell did she have to hear of it from an anonymous source?

Zachary couldn’t confirm that he had committed mass genocide in Central America, not with the existing possibility that she could be hauled in to testify against him. Besides, he was fairly certain she would forget about Central America if he told her about the Glassdome. He discarded the thought, deciding it would be too premature to mention it now. First, he needed to find those ARs.

After a few seconds of the poker face staring game, she said, “What were you thinking?”

“Lila.” He paused to think before he spoke. The key, he reminded himself, would be to say enough to pacify Lila, with as much ambiguity as possible in order to maintain plausible deniability. “Lila, what are you accusing me of?” Feigning confusion, he added, “Yes, I accepted a government contract that employed Zarant Industry’s Military to isolate the Central American block of countries. So what? It is a binding legal contract from multiple legitimate governments. Would you prefer they sit back and let that Ebola virus spread beyond the region? It’s a super virus and could wipe out the global population... it’s been left unchecked for far too long. Time for us to step in.”

The lab-created stealth Ebola virus had been spreading unchecked within the Central American countries for months. Containment efforts came in the form of aggressive

Zarant Military tactics, which included a shoot to kill order for any person who attempted to cross the barricades.

Incredulous, Lila shook her head with anger-driven vigor. “Why? Why must you treat me as if I’m one of your incompetent bootlickers?” She stood and paced the length of his office to calm herself. Her hands were at her temples, trying to rub out the contempt she felt for him at that moment. Eight million people from Central American countries were dead, and more were dying. All because of him, and he acted as if the world were right. “I would have preferred it if you hadn’t introduced your super virus into the region.” She could see that he hadn’t expected her to know that. “So, that is your play. To profit by infecting your opposition with the world’s deadliest Ebola variant? One that your own labs engineered?”

It took a hard swallow for Zachary to regain his composure. He was truly afraid. “Where did you get your information?” His voice was shaky. There was no denying it. Zachary knew for certain that he had a spy in his house, which was extremely worrisome.

“End this massacre. End it now!” Lila did not care about the massacre. The Central American people meant nothing to her. The hard line she’d taken was meant to teach Zachary a lesson. “Don’t you ever go around my back again.” Lila knew she had to keep Zachary on a tight leash. His greed and drive for the pinnacle of power surpassed her own, which made him dangerous.

“Lila, be reasonable. How could I—”

“Enough! I know you have the antidote.” Lila would not back down. The day would come when Zachary held more power than her. Today was not that day. Lila continued to pull a lot of strings amongst the wealthy.

Usually, Zachary knew how to deny any allegations waged against him, true or false. He ran on the belief that it was always better to deny and lie, then ask for forgiveness. But he always played the game by different rules when it came to Lila. She was sharp and vindictive and she would sanction revenge by destruction if she ever believed she was being deceived, or about to be usurped. Zachary knew that he had to tread carefully with Lila; She could still prevent his acquisition of the U.S. Military. At the very least, she could make it a slow and financially painful acquisition. They both knew that Zachary needed to own the U.S. Military to gain absolute control of global governing power.

“Lila—”

She put her hand up to stop him, preferring not to have to listen to another word he said. He had to learn that she was his partner *all* of the time, not only when he needed her help.

“Two years ago, during the financial crisis, when the banks were failing, I handed you the golden key... Abaya Solvent. I made it so that you could not only acquire them, but merge with other banks, while making you look like a glorified Robin Hood.” She began pacing his office. “Abaya Solvent now controls close to eighty percent of the global financial industry.” She placed her palms on his desk and leaned in. “Through mergers and acquisitions and Consensus, you’ve cornered the whole of the financial industry. That’s a record ascent to power that I handed you.” Her hands moved to her waist. “Zachary, who cares if the Central Americans blocked your expansion into their backyard! How much more wealth and power could you possibly need?”

A slight, upward curl at the corners of his lips showed her that he meant to have it all.

Tired of the game, she told him, “End it and end it now!”

Zachary did not respond. He could not. She would see through any lie he told. Instead, he sat back in his cushy leather seat and crossed his arms in contemplation.

How had she found out?

Lila leaned over his desk and dared him to say no.

“Lila, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Lila sneered, “say nothing. Fix it! Now!” She went to the door and reached for the knob. Without looking back, she said, “You have forty-eight hours.” Then she walked out of his office.

As soon as she got home, Lila reached for the whisky decanter, and with a shaking hand, she poured herself a tumbler. Nerves wracked, Lila swigged it down and smiled at her own display of power.

Eight

2045.

At precisely 8:00p.m., as the last rays of sunshine were submerged by darkness, basement doors began to spring open. Residents of Yreka emerged, squinting, adjusting their eyes to the darkness of the night. In the streets, the familiar sound of people in motion and conversation began to climb. Banter and laughter, sadness and frustration, every aspect of life comingled as life slowly spilled into the streets and the dormant were revived.

On Main Street in downtown Yreka, California, a vibrant young woman wearing brown, strappy sandals and a beige, ankle-length dress carried a basket of fruit in her arms. Dried fruit. She dumped the contents into one of the metal bowls on the long, rectangular table; three identical tables flanked hers. The tables ran along the center of Main Street.

The tables made up the daily food ration for the town's population of 243. The table on her left had two extra-large bowls of beef jerky and three of wild turkey jerky—wild *anything* jerky had become a scarcity. Animal protein of any kind had shrunk in availability.

“Only five bowls.” Mindy commented. Just six months back she had counted twelve bowls of jerky on the same table. Only eighteen months before that, there had been several tables with dried meats.

“At least we still have some, right?” Irena said, trying and failing to keep Mindy from triggering her. As much as Irena tried to prevent it, Mindy's presence annoyed her.

Mindy placed a foot on the chair to tighten the strap on her sandal.

A table to their right had two large sacks of rice, four of black beans, and one of barley. Other tables also had dried goods, along with some canned vegetables and packaged goods scavenged from abandoned homes in Redding and Shasta.

“Those dried apples look really good,” Mindy said, as she picked up a dried slice of apple and popped it into her mouth.

It was petty, but Irena wanted to remind Mindy that she was in charge of the grains and legumes table, not the dried apple slices. Why Mindy felt obligated to sample everything was beyond Irena. It felt opportunistic and totally inappropriate, because they already ran low on their daily rations. It felt like a form of entitlement and that bothered Irena. Food was rationed because it was in short supply.

“I wouldn’t know.” Irena used a passive-aggressive sharp tone. It was not that Mindy supplemented her daily ration by taking a sample here and a sample there. It was that she relied on people’s natural aversion to confrontation to grant herself permission.

Mindy caught her tone and sniffed, as if offended. By then, Irena had busied herself with measuring out and weighing portions.

“It’s three ounces per household,” Mindy directed, as if Irena didn’t already know that. Never mind that Irena stood at the same table every day and measured out the rations. With a tightness around her temples, Irena forced a polite grin. Taking that as a friendly sign, Mindy said, “Irena, did I tell you that my son got into the SF SunSafe?” Motherly pride underscored the words ‘my son.’ “I’ll be joining him just as soon as he settles in.”

Digging the metal scoop into the bowl of dried fruit, Irena paused to decide whether or not she wanted to ask a question into Mindy. On the one hand, she’d told herself that she wanted to stop being so petty when it came to Mindy. On the other hand, Mindy really annoyed her.

“Congratulations,” Irena said, not knowing what else to say. Whenever Mindy felt attacked or insecure, she invoked her son and his successes: some wishful, most embellished, and very few true.

“That’s excellent news!” Cathy said as she took her place behind the jerky table. “Hopefully, you’ll join him sooner than later.”

Mindy had reached for another piece of jerky, when she caught Cathy's jab. Mindy pulled her empty hand back and sniffed loudly before she turned and walked away. "I'll get more bags."

Cathy and Irena exchanged disbelieving looks, just as Mondo happened to walk by. Their cheeks warmed from embarrassment when he made a clawing motion in the air with his hand, and accompanied it with a fffft... fffft sound.

"Hey! I cannot help it. She is such... such a... I don't know what she is." Mindy seemed to have that feline trait that raised the hackles of other women upon contact.

"Give her a break. She is lonely."

Cathy shrugged and shook her head. She did not care one iota how Mindy felt. "She needs to be a team player... and she needs to stop lying."

Mondo seemed confused, so Irena explained. "She said that Justin got into the SF SunSafe. Do you buy that? We all know the admittance lottery is a sham. Why lie?"

Admittance into the SunSafes had been publicized as being determined by a lottery system. Zarant newscasts, the few that are put out by Zarant's own media arm, regularly announced winners. However, an underground news media, one that until a year ago provided daily newsfeeds through pirated radio frequencies, gave proof that the SunSafe lottery drawings were a sham. After that, they had disappeared.

"Catty girls," Mondo said, but softened his criticism with a smile. "It might be possible. Justin has been living in the tent cities around the Bay Area. I think the latest one was in Oakland. Actually, from what I have heard, Oakland's tent city now extends from Emeryville to Alameda." There were said to be millions of people living in tent cities. Squatters were said to be anywhere there was open space.

"I do not know, Mondo. That is hard to believe."

"Well, maybe you are right. But what if he got in illegally? Who's to say he didn't find a way in with a smuggler? Where there is a will, there's a way."

Mondo had considered joining Justin for the possibility of landing a job inside the SF SunSafe. The multinationals were all headquartered there. He changed his mind when Justin called and described the conditions as deplorable. He confided to Mondo that urine and feces filled the streets. And he said that disease boomeranged throughout the densely

packed populations. Of course, Mindy knew none of it, because Justin did not want her to worry.

"I guess you're right," Irena said, suddenly not sure why she even cared. "I wish him luck." She said it and meant it, for Justin's sake. And, for Mindy's sake, too.

The night before, a passerby on his way to Ashland, Oregon, happened through Yreka. He described the tent cities like "a real warzone", and said there were burning tire pyres in all of the intersections. Protests. Gun battles. "A real-life Wild West," he'd called it.

Irena had believed it all. The suffering had to manifest somewhere. Complicating things further was the lack of government support for the people. An early safety net voted in by Congress to ease the population's weariness of "machines taking their jobs" was never funded, so the people suffered.

The church bell tolled and everyone froze.

"That's not good," Irena said, and realized she was holding her breath. Mondo looked from her to the other startled faces behind the table. "Alright. Let us go see what this is about."

Out of habit, Cathy wiped her hands on her apron before taking it off, even though she hadn't done anything since putting it on—anything other than gossip. Bunching it up, she dropped the apron on the table and covered the jerky with a clear plastic tarp.

"In case Mindy comes back," she said dryly. It was her attempt at humor, but no one found themselves in the mood to laugh. The most she got was a forced grin from Irena, who, after she covered her own table, placed a hand on Cathy's arm and pulled her along.

Two minutes down the street, Ole, a tall, cheerful, blue-eyed bachelor, worked on boarding up his windows. He had just finished insulating them with foam and a thick layer of aluminum foil, which he sandwiched with plywood, in an effort to keep his home cooler during the day. He hated sleeping in the basement. For some odd reason, basements always made him uneasy.

"The bell! Why would the mayor need to call an emergency meeting?" Ole mumbled to himself. He hammered a nail into the piece of plywood to hold it in place for later, then put the hammer on the window sill. The last emergency meeting brought nothing good. It was too warm to close the front and back doors, so he decided to leave them open.

Besides, a slight breeze might happen by and sweep some of the stagnant hot air out—just maybe. He hoped.

Anxious about the emergency meeting, Ole searched his fellow community members' faces as they walked by. Perhaps one of them knew why the meeting had been called. As he walked past the Yreka Theater, towards the church, the basement doors were thrown open.

“Ard!”

“Ole!” Ard called out, while he kept both of his hands on Marta as they backed out of the stairwell. Marta, Ard's wife, had swollen, arthritic ankles that made walking painful and required help getting upstairs. Ole went to help Ard with Marta. He took her by the other arm and helped lift her. “Thanks, Ole.”

“My pleasure,” Ole said, a bit winded. He always worried he might hurt Marta in the process of attempting to help. They all agreed that a wheelchair and a ramp would be much better for Marta, and for Ard, rather than a forty-three-year-old under Marta's arm, but wheelchairs were near impossible to find anymore.

Without jobs, Americans were no longer the world-class consumers they once were. As a consequence, for-profit hospitals shuttered and left people, like Marta and Ard, in the lurch.

“Ole, you're so wonderful,” Marta said, warmly.

“How ya been, Marta?”

The man was a ceaseless lightning rod of positive energy, and Marta loved it. Besides, he was young and handsome, which made him fun to have around. “Oh, you know.” She shrugged and Ole laughed. He knew what was coming. “Good, considering we'll never again walk in the sun.”

Ole smiled at her. She was a sweet woman who held her husband's adoration in the palm of her hands. “Oh, I do not know. There are rumors about some Artificial Respirator. Maybe, just maybe, if they finally get the thing to work our children will be able to walk in the sun.”

Ard signaled, and they paused so that he could catch his breath. Ole tried not to seem anxious about getting to the emergency meeting, but it was a difficult ask when fellow community members walked past them at a brisk pace. When Ard nodded, and Ole looked

back to Marta, he caught her staring at him with glossy eyes and a loving warmth that was emitted from the depths of her loving soul.

“Ole, you need a wife more than ever. Who’s going to take care of you, like my Ard takes care of me?”

Ole saw the smile on Ard’s face, and the sadness in his eyes. He knew the man’s love for his wife had no limit.

“I’ll know the right gal when I find her.” Ole never took her meddling personally. He knew she meant well.

Mondo, Irena, and Cathy happened to be passing by just then.

“Hey, Ole, Ard, Marta... See you inside,” Mondo greeted, with barely a pause, anxious about the unexpected emergency meeting.

“Ole.” Mindy stopped and nervously greeted Ole.

“Mindy,” Ole said, focused on holding Marta up as she caught her breath. The conspiring grin on Marta’s lips made Ole want to hide somewhere.

“I will... I’ll save you a seat,” Mindy said, as she chased after Irena and Mondo.

“No,” Ole said to Marta. “Wipe that grin off your face.” The last thing he wanted was for Marta to go on about Mindy. At the moment, he had no romantic designs on Mindy, but he was a realist and knew with time his feelings might change.

“Why not?” Her smile said enough to show she was teasing him.

“High-maintenance isn’t even the beginning.” Ole smiled when he saw Ard agree with him. Of course, he only did so after he’d made sure to stand well behind Marta, so she wouldn’t see him nod. The church bell tolled and they all looked in the direction of the source. “Do you know what is coming down the pipe? This town cannot handle much more bad news.”

Yreka, a remote, quaint, one-horse town off of Highway 5 in Northern California, enjoyed vestiges of an old frontier town. Up until a couple of decades ago, the tiny city charmed visitors who would stop through for a gas refill or a stretch of their legs. But that was before the global food shortages, before the town became economically and aesthetically dead.

Bright, fresh flower boxes no longer adorned windows. Curtains and wood shutters were buried beneath plywood and metal sheets that shielded the windows from direct heat. And the lush lawns died and left behind hard dirt.

The bell tolled again in the distance. Ole looked over in the church's direction, wondering who was up there pulling that rope. Initially, he settled on Gregorio, the Menendez kid. He's worked for the mayor's office for the last three years. But then he recalled that Gregorio moved to Los Angeles a couple of months back, either the Los Angeles SunSafe, or to one of the refugee camps that surrounded that SunSafe. No one knew for certain, since the boy seemed to have vanished. The only other kid that worked for the mayor and knew how to toll that bell was Mark, the Simmons' kid.

"It's a bad omen, that's for sure." Marta's limp was painful to watch. Her swollen legs did not let her walk too fast.

Marta needed compression socks and new orthopedic shoes but had nowhere to get them from. A travelling doctor from Ashland used to come to town once a month and prescribe her some pills that helped with the swelling and the pain. Unfortunately, an increase in the number of sudden tempest storms made travel too dangerous, so she ended her visits. That was nearly two years ago. Marta had not seen a doctor since.

"Do you know what the meeting is about?"

"Not the slightest," Marta said as she held tight to Ard's arm and hobbled along. Ard placed his hand over hers to secure it and gave it a loving squeeze.

It seemed questionable whether Marta could make it all the way to the church, which worried Ole. As he watched Marta struggle with every step, Ole decided that he couldn't leave Ard behind to deal with Marta by himself. "If you don't mind, I'll just walk along with you. I'm in no hurry to get in there and hear the bad news."

Gratitude filled Ard. He knew that Ole only stayed behind with them because he was worried about Marta. "Thank you," Ard whispered to Ole, who smiled in response.

"Is that Baily? Did she have her baby?" Marta asked and nodded towards the large family that spilled into the roadway, just ahead of them. They seemed to be in a hurry, so Marta didn't try to call out to them.

Sensing that Marta changed the subject to distract herself from the pain she felt shoot from her legs to her spine, Ard made an earnest effort to play along. Squinting his seventy-

eight-year-old eyes, he looked at each person until he spotted the young woman with a baby hammock strapped to her. The baby wasn't visible from behind, but her body language and the hammock were indicators of motherhood.

"It seems so..." Ard said, cheered on by the idea of new life. "Our little town has grown by one."

"A bright spot in a dark world," Ole said, absentmindedly.

"It is, indeed," Ard nodded, and Marta gave a hardy nod of her own.

Their moment of levity took a scary turn when Marta stumbled and nearly fell. Remarkably, Ard reacted, steeled himself, and held her up. By the time Ole moved to help prop her up, Ard had signaled that he had her. As calm and collected as he seemed to Ole, Ard felt like he was drowning from the fear of losing his wife. He was not ready to lose her. Not yet.

"I should have waited in the basement," Marta said, worried that she had almost taken Ard down with her.

"Nonsense. Just take your time. There is no rush. If we miss any of it someone will fill us in."

"Fill us in on bad news," Ole repeated Ard's words. New graffiti had been scribed over metal sheets placed over the old bakery windows. "Trespassers will be SHOT!" Ole read, recalling it had not been there the week prior. "That's new."

Marta paused to catch her breath and look for herself; she had been focused on the road and not tripping again. "There must have been another break-in," she said, solemnly. Things were getting worse every day and they all knew it.

Ard and Ole shook their heads. Food scavengers had cropped up everywhere. They travel from one town to another during the night, and then they hide out until the sun starts to rise and communities go dormant. Once the sun rises, they raid the homes and loot whatever they like while the residents sleep in their basements.

"Maybe that's what this is about."

They walked on, slowly. Marta hobbled and Ard paced himself, not wanting to rush her. "I doubt it. That does not merit a bell toll."

Three minutes away on a parallel street walked Patricia, Jose, and their two boys towards the old church. The boys were still young, ages two and five. The family lived on forty acres in the outskirts of town, near the foot of the Marble Mountains.

“This can’t be good.” It was the first time the mayor called their home to request their presence at a town meeting.

“Patty, stop finding things to worry about. Let us wait and see what the man has to say before we worry.”

Abandoned cars flecked the streets of Yreka. A small pickup truck with flat tires sat in their path and forced the family to split up to walk around it. When his parents parted, Andrew, the oldest, hesitated. He was unsure of which parent he should follow. Eventually, he chose left, behind Patricia and the stroller.

“That’s what I keep telling my wife,” James said, a fellow neighbor. He tilted his head in his wife’s direction and she rolled her eyes back at him in mock frustration. James and Mira live in an expanded basement beneath the old furniture store, which also happened to house one of the four greenhouses built by the residents to help feed the town’s people.

Mira, chewed her bottom lip and glanced up at the starlit sky. After a moment, she let out an exasperated breath and said, “Well, we all know that it can’t possibly be good news now, can it?” That time, it was James who rolled the eyes.

Jose cast a worried glance toward their sons as his wife commiserated with Mira. They could not afford more bad news.

“I still recall the first time that bell tolled. They told us that the power grid had gone caput. I guess I should have been surprised, but I was not. For decades, special interests had blocked every effort to modernize our infrastructure... so no surprise there. But then the bell tolled again and we were told we had to deal with global food shortages. Well,” Jose again glanced at his two boys, “that metal harbinger of bad news is tolling again and I don’t like it.”

Residents of Yreka had learned to dread the toll of the church bell. Jose reminded himself that the residents of Yreka were not the only ones who had to deal with bad news. Across America, communities fought to figure out how to survive off-grid, because the grid had moved to the SunSafes.

Inside of the church, space was tight. It seemed the whole of Yreka was in attendance, and it likely was. As space was made for new arrivals, neighborly smiles were exchanged, along with worried whispers about the possible emergency that had summoned them there.

“As I said before, water is the one resource that will doom us, unless we find a better way to capture rain water and recycle it. We’re doing a good job, but with climate disintegration we have to do even better,” the mayor was speaking to a group of residents who had surrounded him, just left of the podium.

“Mayor, I think we need to address—”

“Norma!” Mayor Michaels said, cutting her off sharply.

The barrel-bodied woman with a sour disposition had been in his office all morning. With so many worries piled up on everyone, Mayor Michaels didn’t have the bandwidth to listen to petty complaints. It was Norma’s position that certain residents need to volunteer and participate more. One of the families she targeted lost two of their three children in a sudden windstorm last year. The children had been carried off from the playground, along with the swing set and slide, and hadn’t been recovered. Eileen, the kids’ mother, spiraled into a severe depression that left her husband to raise their infant daughter on his own. The other family’s situation was just as tragic. Carly’s husband’s car broke down on a drive to Ashland to visit his ailing parents. The day had been so hot that he had no chance of survival. They found his body next to the car a few nights later.

“But, Mayor Michaels—”

“Norma, please sit down and wait for the Q&A part at the end.” He checked the time on his watch, 9:25p.m. The mayor beat the metal spoon against the large metal pot. “Alright! It is time to begin! Let’s bring order to this meeting.”

“Q&A!” Norma sniffed loudly and marched to her seat in the front row. To Mayor Michael’s annoyance, Norma sat directly in front of the podium, where she dramatically displayed her full displeasure on her face.

Mayor Michaels suppressed his desire to slap sense into her and cleared his throat instead. “Thank you, Norma,” he forced himself to say. Not waiting for her sarcastic response, he turned his eye on other disruptors. “William, John, Ramon. Please... we won’t get a thing done if we can’t get started.” Mayor Michaels noticed Norma’s chin

rise a slight degree and he pursed his lips in an effort to stifle his frustration. In his thirty-three years, he never before dealt with a more opinionated and difficult woman.

A low murmur of worried conversation hummed just over the crowd that merited another bang on the pot. *Clang!* Everyone settled down.

“Thank you, Mayor!” said Henry, a tall and very slender man wearing a loose, gray T-shirt that made him look anemic.

Henry functioned as the town’s self-proclaimed hippie-ologist, or herb-man, whose knowledge of plant biology and equatorial medicinal applications proved indispensable over the last two years, since the last doctor visited their town.

“Ard! Marta!” Mondo called out, waiving his hands for them to join him in the front row. “Ole, I saved space.”

Disapproving of the interruption, Norma gave a resounding shake of the head, for which Mayor Michaels gave her a glaring stink eye that made her sit up.

“Sorry, Mayor. We left as soon as we heard the bells.”

“There is no rush, Ard. Take your time. Just glad you could join us.”

Marta smiled gratefully and slowly took her seat. Ard kept her hand in his and sat beside her. Ole sat on the opposite side of Marta, as far away from Mindy as possible.

As soon as they were settled, the mayor gave Henry the “go ahead” look to begin the meeting.

“Thank you all for joining us. Montserrat and I are here because we’ve received some startling information that we believe you need to hear. It will explain why, if you try to drive towards the Bay Area, you will find that Zarant Military has placed a roadblock. All highways going south are shut.” The mention of Zarant Military and blockade together didn’t bode well for those in the audience. Luckily, most residents never bothered to venture out of town anymore.

The audience split their attention between Henry, a respected chemist hidden beneath a hippie façade, and Montserrat Navarro, his wife. Montserrat moved to stand behind the podium with Henry.

“Why is Zarant Military in California National Guard territory?” One voice, that of Ole, spoke up. He asked the question everyone else wanted to ask, but were afraid of the answer they might get.

Irena sat forward and inadvertently blocked Mindy's view of Ole, which he privately appreciated. The crowd grumbled and whispered amongst themselves.

Montserrat stepped forward and silenced the room when she said, "Because our National Guard is in the East Bay, imposing martial law."

Foreboding weighed heavily in the room. Silence moved in, then the panic struck. Conversations became louder until no one could hear the mayor trying to calm the crowd. The metal spoon went flying hard against the pot until silence finally returned. Mayor Michaels would later realize he had given himself a sore wrist. For now, he looked to Montserrat and Henry to continue.

"What's happened in the East Bay?" A wide-eyed Mindy asked. Fear had caused her to stand up before she realized she was on her feet.

"Ebola," Montserrat said, as direct as her heartbreak would allow. She knew that more than half of the people in the church had family living in the refugee camps that skirted the SF SunSafe. The whole East Bay was being called ground zero by Zarant Military.

"I have to go!" One man stood up, ready to march out. "My—"

"You can't!" Montserrat said, at an elevated pitch that stopped everyone from talking. Once she had their attention again, she said, "You won't get past the military. But if you do, and by some miracle you survive long enough to come back, and you get past them again, we will be forced to shoot you where you stand, regardless of how beloved you are in this community. We will shoot you and burn your body where it falls." Her words were cold and callous, but her voice carried compassion.

Silence returned as the shock set in. Those who had intended to move towards the doors, stopped in their tracks. Every one of them seemed suddenly paralyzed.

"You can't do that!" Mindy said, her fist was in the air and she was sobbing. Irena's empathy kicked in and she embraced Mindy, though it proved impossible to comfort her.

Mayor Michaels adjusted his glasses. With the town's burden pressing down on his shoulders, he said, "We must. We can't risk infecting our entire community."

Suddenly, those who'd stood felt weak-kneed and found their seats again. Women, men, and children wept openly. Some children wept just because their parents were weeping, but some were old enough to understand that their own father, mother, sister, or brother would never be coming home again.

“What—” A man with a round face, puffy pink cheeks, and bald spot that reached from his forehead to his crown, cleared his throat to try and speak over his heartbreak. Mayor Michaels recognized Charles, a mild-mannered Oregonian, who joined the community when his wife died from skin cancer last year. Their daughter was in that East Bay refugee camp. “Where did it come from? How—” He couldn’t say more before his voice cracked and he had to sit down again. Despair forced him to plant his face in his hands and sob.

The mayor looked to Montserrat and Henry. In his heart, he knew that the atrocity in the East Bay had everything to do with the multinationals, but he couldn’t give it voice. In the end, there would be nothing any of them could do about it.

“Does anyone here remember what happened in Central America?” Ole stood up and spoke loud enough for everyone to hear him. “I mean, it has been what, ten years? No one could ever pin that genocide on Zarant, right? But we all know the CEO was behind it, don’t we! Isn’t that the same thing that is happening in the East Bay? And what about the genocide in Shasta? Those poor people! One day they were protesting against the food ration cut-backs, and a few days later everyone in their town was dead!” Ole was distraught and outwardly agitated, and didn’t care if some disagreed with him. He was certain his words were more than mere conjecture. And, he was certain that most of the people there knew it too.

Since FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) was privatized—the contract granted to Zarant Industries—redlined communities all across the country had their rations cut. Since an independent media no longer existed, no one could report on it. America’s private news media had been acquired by the multinationals, then systematically dismantled. Journalists joined the redlined population and were prohibited from taking up residence in any SunSafe.

“What is important now is our community. So, let’s focus on how we are going to survive long-term,” said Mayor Michaels, seeing no point in pointing out what everyone already knew. They couldn’t do anything about Zarant Industries anyhow, except do everything they could to stay off their radar.

Inside Lazador's Nest, Dwayne ducked and swerved his upper torso left as Claudia's left heel cleared his head. "Good," he said, leading into her with a right jab, followed by a hook. She effortlessly deflected them both.

Taking advantage of Dwayne's sudden distraction—Nina, his wife, had just entered the training room—Claudia connected her left fist with his jaw, and her right foot stopped only a millimeter from his knee caps. Pleased with herself, Claudia paused to catch her breath, just as her feet were swept from under her.

"No fair! I stopped before I contacted your knee!"

"Hey, nothing is fair. You should have made contact." Dwayne grinned mischievously. His eyes moved onto his wife's center of gravity, and he beamed with pride.

There was a slight, visible bump where Nina's six-pack abs usually parked. "Hey! I didn't know you were going to be a father."

Startled, Dwayne shushed her. "Nina doesn't want anyone to know for another week."

Nina stopped to chat with another of Dwayne's martial arts students and missed the exchange between Claudia and Dwayne.

"Got it." Claudia nodded and greeted Nina with a sloppy grin. Dwayne rolled his eyes at her.

Nina smiled. "Okay, I can see that you are dying to ask. We are eleven weeks."

Claudia brightened up. "Oh! Really exciting!!"

"It is," Nina said, rubbing her belly. "But I'm too hungry to talk about anything other than eating. Can we go to lunch?"

"Anything you want, my little incubator," Dwayne said, already leading them to the door. "Let's cut through the tech room."

There had been a few stomach growls during the training session, so it surprised no one that Claudia joined them.

"That's new," Nina said, about a hologram of a metal ball with a red laser shooting out of it, towards the ceiling.

Dwayne studied the ball floating a foot off the hologram table. It was chest high for him. "This little ball is supposed to be able to read the oxygen levels in the atmosphere. I think they launched this last month."

“It’s still a mystery to me.”

“What is?” Claudia asked Nina. They stopped before the red ball to examine it.

“Where our oxygen is coming from.”

Claudia often wondered the same thing. No one had been able to give her an acceptable answer. The lack of explanation might be why Lazador’s engineers had become so engrossed with measuring the daily oxygen fluctuations.

“What is that?” Nina said, as she stopped before a concrete slab that had half of a frog hanging out of it. From the looks of it, it had been a real, living frog. Only half a torso remained: the part with the hind legs hung limply. “How cruel! Why would they cement half of a living frog?”

Claudia noticed the way Nina shielded her belly with her hands, as if to keep her baby from such gruesomeness.

Before the SunSafe migration, Nina had been a martial arts expert, which was how she met Dwayne. In their prior lives, before moving below ground, they owned a martial arts studio and Nina wore her hair in dookie braids.

“I wonder...” Claudia looked around. Her eyes settled on a palm-sized gadget on the table. “Clarence mentioned the engineers were working on some portable Transport technology. He said it would be capable of Transporting a person from one location to another by breaking down human tissue into matter.” Pointing at the hind portion of a frog hanging out of a concrete block, she added, “I wonder if this frog was supposed to have been Transported onto the concrete slab, not into it?”

“Like I said, poor thing.” Nina shook her head and moved them along. She would rather not look at the limp hind legs if she didn’t have to. “At least it wasn’t a human they did that to.”

“I’m astonished that we still have frogs.”

“Dwayne, they have a frog farm.”

“No, they don’t.”

“Yes, they do.” Claudia confirmed. “Apparently, they’re easy to reproduce, and they use them for experiments.”

Only half joking, Dwayne said, “I could go for some frog legs.”

Claudia stopped walking and shook her head. “That just sounds wrong to me.”

“Try them once, then tell me if it still sounds wrong.”

“No, thank you.” Claudia shut the mental door on that. Reaching up, she spun a hologram of a cloud and left it rotating. The engineers had a quirky sense of humor. Once, they had every hologram table projecting puffy white clouds. Other times, they left them projecting flower bouquets. More often than not, they are left projecting some image of a conceptual technology. Lately, they’ve all been projecting Lazador’s second-generation neurochip, with capabilities they’ve kept a secret, even from Claudia.

Clarence, Gary, Michelle, and Edward have the first-generation neurochip, which Claudia secretly envied. Soon, she would have the next generation neurochip implanted. Then, it would be *their* turn to be a little green.

“Oh. I must be hungry. That smells wonderful,” Nina said, as Dwayne opened the door to the dining hall and the sound of jovial conversation pulled them in.

Nine

September, 2045.

Gary and Clarence poured over a draft blueprint to expand the Nest's main dining hall. M&M, for Mayowa and Motunrayo, marked the changes on the blue prints as they were pointed out.

Both Mayowa and Motunrayo lost their families in the Nigerian famine that decimated their country as they studied in the U.S.

"Dad, it's Garret." Michelle, Gary's oldest daughter, interrupted their meeting to hand him the small, handheld device—the screen was small, twice the size of the ubiquitous 1990s beeper, and was meant for brief, encrypted communications. The technology used end-to-end encryption and had been modified by Clarence at Gary's request. The first device had been given to Entelo before he went off-grid—It's been nearly twenty years and Entelo had yet to activate his device. General Garret was one of three people living outside of Lazador's Nest given a two-way encrypted communication device. Yesenia and Steven received the third device.

Gary looked at the device's small screen. "Garret?"

Michelle nodded and said, "Garret." She had had never met General Garret, nor did she know much about him. All she knew was that her father called him Garret and always took his messages seriously.

"Where's Claudia?" Gary asked, as he searched the large room for her. The primary office was a five thousand-square-foot space filled with clean, sleek standup desks, drafting boards, and other design equipment.

"Krav Maga," Michelle replied as her father punched in his secret code into the device to retrieve the message.

Claudia was in the midst of her daily circuit training. Today was Krav Maga; tomorrow, Capoeira; the next day, Taekwondo. The daily routine was grueling, but she was committed to it. But then, she had to be committed if she intended to ascend to the role of Lazador Defense Department Chief. Besides, she thrived on it.

MEET. SF SUNSAFE. ARASAP!! Garret's text was direct and urgent. The last time Garret reached out to him the Nest gained the Transport Technology, along with the two Russian developers. Before that, it had been years since they'd communicated. A second message provided encrypted details that included a pin number and location information.

From the beginning, Garret had always adamantly opposed any in-person meetings. Neither did he ever want to know anything about Gary's Nest. All Garret ever needed to know was that Gary was resourceful, and that he had gone off-grid somewhere in California.

"He wants to meet."

Clarence nodded and didn't bother to hide his shock. "Where?"

"SF SunSafe." The fact that General Garret did not seem to be taking into account the difficulty of Gary reaching the SunSafe meant that he was dealing with an urgent matter. A matter he seemed to think was worthy of putting both of their lives at stake.

There was no need to say more. Michelle shook her head. "No," she said, in absolute terms. She would not let her father travel to the SF SunSafe.

The look Gary gave her, that determined look of his, never sat well with Michelle's intuition.

"Dad. No." Arms crossed beneath her breasts, she shook her head and said, "Too risky." They had been living underground for a full fifteen years. No one knew what the conditions were like beyond Reedley. What they did know was that their city, and the ones nearby, had been completely abandoned. Also, according to the last news report they received well over a year ago, travelling had become completely prohibited by the National Guard. "How would you get there? We do not have Transport booths like the SunSafes. And, who is this General? Shouldn't he know better?" Lazador had the Transport Technology, but it was still in the test phase.

"Clarence," Gary said, brushing his daughter's fears aside.

“I’ll get working on a plan,” Clarence said, giving Michelle an apologetic glance. He agreed with Gary. It had to be important if Garret wanted to meet in person at the SF SunSafe. The man *had* to know that his request to meet in person would put Gary’s life at risk, as well as his own.

Less than a week later, Gary and Clarence set out on dirt bikes. They had spare fuel for the dirt bikes, carried extra food and water, and had one change of clothes. They set out of Lazador’s Nest as soon as the sun went down. Gary intended to reach the SF SunSafe’s periphery by morning.

They never got far.

What they found along the way shocked them. Cars doubled as coffins; housing bodies long ago decomposed. Highway 99 was a solid bottleneck in every direction. Even the highway’s shoulders were clogged with rusted, abandoned cars. There it was, nearly midnight and the day’s intense heat still radiated from the cars, making Clarence want to pull his sweat-sticky shirt off. The people had likely baked to death inside their cars. Clarence could not believe how many bodies were scattered everywhere.

“Something trapped all of these people out here.” On the highway, in the middle of nowhere, with no shelter but the convection oven that was their car.

Clarence figured that Gary meant that as a means to sort through the senseless gruesomeness everywhere. Still, he answered, “I bet this was done to keep them from reaching San Francisco.” North and southbound directions of the highway were clogged. “It’s possible that these traffic jams extend for miles, possibly as far as SF and LA.”

Gary gave a quiet nod. The homeless problem that afflicted the SunSafe had likely been the impetus for the closures, but they couldn’t know for sure until they reached the SF SunSafe. In a text, Steven once described a “desperate chaos” of bodies that plagued the streets of the old San Francisco city. Gary wondered what it must have felt like for Steven, when he stood inside of the safety of the SunSafe, surrounded by a sea of human misery trying to escape the heat in haphazard shelters.

Steven’s last text message had been received over a year ago. No further communications had been received from Steven or Yesenia since then. Gary wondered

whether Steven or Yesenia had crossed paths with General Garret. If they had, they could not know they had a mutual connection—Gary.

Aside from the freeway graveyards, huge swaths of road had been destroyed by storms, which further complicated travel. Bodies dotted the landscape. As for structures, plenty remained standing, though some barely. There was one instance where they saw a path of destruction a mile wide, carved by what had to have been a tornado. In its path it left mangled cars and broken structures for miles.

Gary and Clarence had not gone too much further beyond the tornado's path of destruction before they had to turn back.

Neurochips allowed the wearers to share their live vision stream with those they were tethered to. It could be person-to-person, person-to-network, or multi-person-to-network. Gary and Clarence had both been tethered to Lazador's network, so that their entire experience could be followed live on the Control Room's hologram table.

"Dad, that was gruesome," Claudia said, as soon as they returned to Lazador's Nest. Michelle, Edward, and Claudia had watched their entire ordeal through their neurochip feed.

Lazador implanted the first neurochips in Michelle, Clarence, and Gary. Developed as a means for communication amongst the Nest's directors using thought, it had since evolved into a critical management tool. A nano chip embedded in the cerebral cortex enabled text messaging and the sharing of live feeds of a person's vision, regardless of where they were. As long as a wearer remained tethered to Lazador's server, the neurochipped could connect to each other.

"All those lost lives," Michelle said, the horror still on her mind. "Is it possible that Garret found a way to subjugate Zachary? Or to bring down the multinationals," she speculated out loud.

They had yet to figure out what ARASAP meant. Gary wondered whether it was not a typo for ASAP.

It was possible, but Clarence told himself to temper his expectations. Many had tried before to bring the powerful multinationals to heel; one had yet to succeed. During their first year underground, an off-grid outfit located in Santa Cruz hacked their way into

Zarant's servers and wreaked havoc on them. Within days, the outfit disappeared. Gary, who had been friends with the founder, tried reaching him for months, but he never resurfaced. There were other attempts to take Zarant down, all of them failed; each ended with the disappearance or extermination of the dissidents.

In Los Angeles, a fist of armed citizens had attacked a Zarant outpost to help their fellow people gain access to the LA SunSafe. News reports showed them getting mowed down by Zarant Military tanks with machine guns. Up to that point, it had been considered an unprecedented heavy-handed response. Soon, the shock passed and the scene became a regular event on the nightly news. No one from government ever bothered to intervene. Government had been, for all intents and purposes, castrated by the multinationals.

"Gary, she could be right."

The look on Clarence's and Claudia's faces said they heartily disagreed with Edward. If General Garret had brought the multinationals to heel, then why would he feel the need to send such a cryptic message? Why wouldn't he just say so?

"Maybe," Gary said. If Garret found a way to take down the multinationals, it would be a game changer. They could join forces. General Garret and his team would work from the inside, and Lazador would take the giants down from the outside. "I think I know how to get there." Admittedly, Gary was not an optimist. He knew Garret enough to know that the man wouldn't have reached out if the news weren't dire. Too much was at stake.

It would be great if Garret had managed to take Zachary and the other CEOs down, but as a man who trafficked only in reality, Gary knew better. It was more than likely that something had gone amuck, something bigger than what they'd already seen. A slight probability existed that it had to do with the sudden gradual drop in oxygen Lazador's team had detected.

On a day-over-day basis, the drop in oxygen was not alarming. When Daniela and her team recorded the first drop, it seemed insignificant and barely registered on the reader. But as the months passed, the drop in oxygen continued to accumulate. Initially, when Daniela, a NOAA scientist in her former life, reported the drop in oxygen levels to Gary, it hadn't been disconcerting; It was a small drop monitored over a too short a period to cause alarm. His recommendation had been for them to keep their eyes on it. At the end

of the year, when a glum-faced Daniela, Othello, and Shawnel were found standing at his door with graphs and hard data, he saw reason for concern.

At first, the drop appeared negligible, which allowed for the assumption that the drop would decline over time, given that human activity involving carbon fuels was non-existent. But what they discovered was the opposite. Oxygen depletion increased at a low, but consistent rate. After that, they reached mutual agreement: the loss of oxygen was a puzzle that required attention.

“I have to make that meeting.” If Garret had information on the oxygen depletion, he wanted it.

“But Gary, we have no way of getting you there.”

Gary was mentally rummaging through his thoughts, through whatever different options could get him to the SF SunSafe. Which meant, what? How could he get from Lazador’s Nest to the SF SunSafe without—

Wide-eyed, Gary turned to Clarence and said, “I know! I know how I can get there!”

“Kisenya?” Clarence said, suspecting he knew the answer, but wanted Gary to confirm. No one had used the Portable Transport Technology to travel, because the technology was still being tested. Period. “No way she lets you.”

The two Russian rescues from the Appalachian underground community brought the Transport technology with them. General Garret had given Gary the heads up when he left the Russians and their technology blueprints in Los Banos for Gary to pick up. By then, Garret had taken a copy of the blueprints for Zachary—he could not show up empty-handed.

The genius of the Portable Transport Technology was that it would use GPS location and radio waves to move a person from one location to another. Unfortunately, it remained a work in progress. There were still issues that had to be resolved— primarily, how to avoid being Transported into an area where an existing object, structure, or person already existed. Doing so would result in a painful death as the broken-down matter fused with existing, solidified matter. Gary was familiar with the frog and the concrete block in the technology lab.

As Kisenya, one of the founders, had pointed out, “Deconstructed matter will instantly fuse with other matter. So, if you Transport there, to where that table is,” Kisenya had

pointed across the room, to a table, “well, you become part of the table. At least the part of you that fuses with the table.” In that instance, Kisenya had been certain that death would occur.

By necessity, Lazador’s Transport technology had been designed to leapfrog the SunSafe’s version of the technology. Zarant’s version required Transport booths, which relied on existing fiber optic cables to Transport. This allowed them to install Transport booths in every SunSafe, so the people were free to move between SunSafes by Transporting from one booth to another.

By contrast, Lazador had no access to fiberoptic cables. Left with no alternative, they innovated and reconfigured the technology to harness existing cellphone towers and satellites. Kisenya and Igor had been working on the technology for several years, and it sounded like they were close to being able to safely Transport a human.

“Get me Igor and Kisenya.”

With an eager look in her eyes, Claudia nodded and went to fetch them.

Michelle watched her sister go and shook her head. They could not be more different. The Maverick and the Nerd, that’s how the sisters differed. “Dad, you can’t be serious.”

Disquiet staidness saturated the hot night air that pressed down on the resilient residents of Yreka as they gathered under the protective curtain of night. The town’s main street held the town’s residents as they gathered for their food rations.

Marta leaned heavily against the porch railing of the old Yreka Bakery, taking short breaths as she enjoyed her favorite sport—people watching. Smiling, Montserrat approached. Unlike the town’s people who streamed in dressed in their ill-fitting, hand-me-down clothes scavenged from abandoned homes, Montserrat looked spectacular in a red summer dress and sandals.

“Marta,” Montserrat said, as she placed a nurturing arm on the older woman’s shoulder. It was hard not to check on her health, but Ard asked her not to mention Marta’s labored breaths.

Across the street, Ard and Ole surfaced from the Yreka Coffeehouse basement holding chairs. Ard searched for his wife then shuffled towards her. He wore his brown orthopedic shoes, khaki pants, and favorite salmon colored T-shirt. Montserrat became teary-eyed

when she saw the way Ard looked so lovingly at his wife as he weaved his way towards her. Ole held two chairs, one in each arm, and followed a few paces behind Ard.

The few bits of Ard's mumbling that Ole's ears caught made him grin. Ard resented the ban on the use of lights, including candles, when moving around in the open; it couldn't be helped and Ard knew it, too, which was why Ole smiled. Complaining about the same things was Ard's shtick. He was known as a bit of a curmudgeon, albeit one with a big, soft heart.

"Marta, dear. Sit. You are going to wear yourself out." With Ole's help, Ard was able to guide her onto a chair.

The sight of Marta's painfully swollen legs gave Ole a start. He knew she was in bad shape. He'd glimpsed her legs in the past, but they had definitely gotten worse. A lot worse. "Ard—"

"I know," Ard replied in a heartbreaking whisper. His bottom lip quivered, and he turned away. He did not want his beautiful wife to see his pain. "She has to hold on, for me," Ard whispered to Ole.

Ard had already decided that when Marta went, he would follow. He just needed a little more time to prepare, to gather the courage to follow through.

Montserrat heard the quiver in Ard's voice during his exchange with Ole and had to steel herself to keep from crying. She knew how he felt. Everyone in Yreka felt the same way. It was why there were few single people left in town. In a world where everything was in short supply, including humans, love was what kept most people going. Ard and Marta were the perfect example of that.

Ole patted Ard's back and wished there were something he could do for Marta. "Maybe they'll find a doctor out there and bring one back," Ole whispered as he took the space beside Montserrat. A doctor would be a blessing for many community members.

Montserrat cringed inwardly, hoping Ard had not heard. She didn't want to give him any false hope. The odds of the scouts finding a doctor were slim. As it was, she wasn't too hopeful they'd even locate other communities out there; at least not any that would willingly show themselves.

"It would be nice," she whispered back to Ole. When she glanced over her shoulder, Ard was standing next to his seated wife, holding her hand. Always the gentleman. He

was clearly leaving the other chair open for her. “Ard, you take the chair. I need to go speak with Henry.”

Henry walked up the west side of the street, alongside Mayor Jonathan Michaels, each toted a wagon heavy with forty-pound packs and other gear.

As Montserrat cut through the thickening crowd, Ole heard Ard say, “Spitfire, that one,” as he took Montserrat’s vacated spot, next to Ole. His eyes locked dead center on Patti. She stood in the street and held her husband under a bruising glare.

Trying not to watch them argue, Ole shifted his chair for a different line of sight. He didn’t need to eavesdrop to know what that was about. He would wager that she wasn’t pleased he volunteered for the mission.

“No. You still haven’t convinced me why it has to be you!” Patricia had Daniel on her hip while Andrew stood at her side wearing blue flip-flops, a pair of dirty jeans that stopped above his dirty little ankles, and a green T-shirt.

Ole noticed the boy trying to appear brave in front of his father. The way Andrew’s little chin stuck into the air in defiance of his red-rimmed eyes nearly broke Ole’s heart. He could not understand why Jose volunteered, either.

“Patti, we’ve talked about this.” Placing his hand on Andrew’s little head and cupping Daniel’s chin, while holding her glare and matching her resolve, he said, “I have to. For their future... for a chance at one.” Trailing off, he fought to keep his own tears at bay.

“But the storm—”

“Patti, that is exactly why it has to be me.” Jose spoke with an unwavering determination.

A cyclone that came on without warning and turned into a tornado had struck at two the prior afternoon, during the day’s peak heat hours. Luckily, the town’s people had been asleep and safe in their basements. The vortex mouth ran along the base of the Marble Mountains and sounded like a thousand diesel engines threatening to combust. As it moved, it sucked up everything in its path, which happened to run over a swath of Jose’s and Patti’s farm. Startled out of a deep sleep, Jose hurriedly carried their two boys onto their bed and worked to calm Patti’s nerves. He had held his family tight until the storm passed. If one went, they all went.

The last part was the crux of why Patti wanted him to stay. She needed her husband. “The storm affects us all, Jose. Not just you.” Her parents were in Berkeley, most likely dead from the Ebola virus that swept through the East Bay. Everything left in her life of any importance was right there. She did not want to lose another part of it. In that moment, she didn’t think she could take losing any more loved ones. Not now. Not with two young boys. Not in an environment of such scarcity. “We depend on you, you know that.”

He knew that, but he could not just sit by and do nothing. He had to try to do something for his children to have a chance to survive. “Which is why it is my job to try and make things better. Patti, don’t you see? It is either now or later. We are running out of resources here.” He looked down at Andrew, his oldest, who looked up at his father and soaked in every word he said. Jose thought of telling him to go play, so he wouldn’t be bothered with grown-up problems. But that was no longer an option. The world was different and the boys had to grow up. Fast. “We don’t know how much longer we can keep up this... this... Yreka experiment. You *know* we were never meant to become a self-sustaining community.”

Twelve years without a government grid and diminished food rations forced Yreka residents to become wholly reliant on their subterranean gardens, gardens that had not been designed to function as the sole food suppliers. Consequently, canned food scavenging excursions had been relied upon to augment the food supply, until the Ebola virus news struck and all scavenging ceased.

“But why you? There are so many other husbands and fathers here. Why you? Why do I have to risk *my* husband?”

Not prepared with a good answer, he resorted to repeating himself. “Because I’m afraid that if we don’t do something, we’re all going to—” *Die*. Jose could not say it out loud. *That* he would spare his son.

Yreka, like the rest of the world, relied on finite resources to survive. Their entire existence was precarious at best. Crops are grown inside of seven warehouses across town that once served as distribution centers for the now defunct grocery chains. Every structure in their town risked being destroyed during violent storms. Water posed a particularly vexing problem. Because the town’s folk never had access to the proper equipment, they were never able to ascertain actual water levels in their underground

waterbed. For all anyone in Yreka knew, they could have enough water for a day, a year, or ten years.

Ron, a tall, willowy man with long limbs and big extremities, that made him look like he walked right out of an animated film, patted Jose on the back as he walked by. Patti watched Ron with empathy as he went to stand before his wife, Railey, and placed a big hand over her pregnant belly, then touched his forehead to hers.

“...our needs, Rashida. I must do this.”

Jose almost smiled. It seemed Calvin, who was somewhere behind him, was having the same discussion with his wife.

Calvin and Rashida, an ex-Marine and his sophisticated, Harvard Law educated wife, were first-generation Yrekans. Calvin inherited the farm from his aunt, Lanelle, a loner who never had children of her own. At first, they shunned the small town with every fiber in their bodies, but as the global economy tanked and the unemployed ranks swelled, Rashida’s once prestigious law firm was forced into bankruptcy.

With both of them on the unemployment roll, it had been a mere matter of time before dire financial circumstances shoved them to Yreka. In the end, the shove had been essential to their wellbeing. The last news cycle they’d seen, nearly eight years ago, before the multinationals acquired most of the media outlets, showed New York City wading in seawater.

“Jose, I realize how bleak our situation is but, I—” Tired of arguing the point she was not winning, Patti conceded. “I’m afraid you won’t be back.” It wasn’t until Andrew’s little body stiffened that she realized that he understood what she’d meant.

Ron and Railey were, once again, in Patti’s direct line of sight. Railey absentmindedly caressed her belly while she spoke with her husband. Tears ran down her cheeks unchecked. As soon as she realized she’d been staring, Patti turned to the little one she had on her hip and rubbed the shag of hair on his head.

“Patti.”

Patti’s eyes wandered to where Ard and Marta sat on the porch. As usual, Ard held Marta’s hand in his. “Jose, I want a chance to have *that*.” Patti said, and pointed at the old, loving couple. “Don’t go away and take my chance with you. Please, please stay.”

Jose looked over and saw the elderly couple, then looked over at the fat moon that floated in the sky. “We’ll have it.” Exasperated, he pleaded for understanding. “Sweetheart, it’s why I am doing this.” He took her hands in his. “I don’t want us to be like those communities that have gone radio silent.”

There was no means by which to know how many people still survived off-grid. Occasionally, someone would find Yreka’s frequency on the ham radio and babble away about the end of mankind, the entire time refusing to give away their location. Other times, people just wanted to share their story, to commiserate with someone else, so that someone out there knew they existed. One woman, who said she lived in the Northwest and refused to give any further details, narrated the tale of death that whipped through her community. “When I look out my window, the streets are mostly empty of people; mind you, there are no live ones. At least, I have not seen another living soul in months, maybe even a year now. It is... it’s been so long. I am so lonely.” Jane’s voice was a conduit to those who listened to her pain and suffering. “The homes... most of them still have the families inside; they’re dead, of course.”

With each day that passed, Jane’s voice grew weaker. By the end of her life, she spoke in a breathless whisper. “Suicides, diseases, tornadoes. But the fires—” her breath labored, “they burned for months. Wiped out our food supply and poisoned our water. We became so desperate that we drank the water anyway. We ate the rats, too... so much desperation. I’m sure the water is the reason my body is breaking down. All I can hope for is that my daughter is safe in the Seattle SunSafe, I, I—” She never finished her thought.

The Yreka community ham radio belonged to Jonathan, the town Mayor, who happened to be an amateur ham radio operator. He made regular efforts to make contact with others who remained out there. On a couple of occasions, he managed to connect with underground communities. One had been in Alaska. The last time they checked in, Kunik, the Inuit leader, reported their state had plunged into a severe drought and, much like the Northwest, was ablaze. That was six months ago. A small community surviving in New Mexico also stumbled onto their channel. Christa, their self-proclaimed amateur ham radio operator, explained that the midwestern states were being hammered by both a drought and a continuum of tornadoes that ripped away their solar panels and their

greenhouses. As a last-ditch effort, they were going to attempt to force their way into the San Diego SunSafe. It's been seven weeks since their attempt. All there was to do was hope they got in.

The most recent contact came from a community in Siskiyou, Oregon. Sadly, they communicated long enough to apologize for reaching out, then went radio silent.

"Are we all here?" Mayor Michaels said, standing on an overturned bucket. He visually swept the crowd. It looked like most of the community was out, and that made him proud to belong to it.

Five Yreka community members, four men and one woman, were tasked with travelling north to search for other communities surviving on their own. The mission was to locate them, join resources, and collaborate for the sake of survival.

"Alright, let's gather round," Mayor Jonathan Michaels summoned the community around the four other scouts. Rashida took his left hand and Mary took his right. A circle of prayer was formed. "Dear Father, we ask that you protect...."

Patti had become too bitter to pray. Instead, she chastised God for having fed them to the rich and powerful. *They* were the ones who destroyed the Earth. The ones who hoarded the wealth. *They* were responsible for the misery and death of millions. And still, *her God* rewarded them with the SunSafes and abandoned communities like hers.

"Patti," Rashida's voice brought her back. Patti had not realized how hard she'd been squeezing Rashida's hand. "He'll be alright," Rashida said, her glossy eyes strove to provide Patti with a measure of reassurance she doubted herself. "Calvin and Melinda will be with him. They will look out for each other." Her volume was low enough so that only Patti could hear.

Patti knew Rashida spoke the words for her as much as for herself. Her husband, Calvin, was one of the five. "Thank you," Patti said, gratefully. Three ex-Marines, Jose and Calvin being two of them, and Melinda, a deceptively strong woman of Puerto Rican heritage. Melinda, accustomed to being underestimated, came packaged in a sinuous, yet lethal, body with long legs and an attractive face.

"Amen," Jonathan said, with a clap of his hands. He was ready to go. He too claimed to have drawn a short straw, but Patti suspected that Mayor Michaels, like her husband, had actually volunteered. In fact, she believed that every one of the five had volunteered

for the mission. “Let’s get packs on and head out. I want to be on the highway by twenty hundred hours.” That gave them fifteen minutes for their goodbyes.

Patti took the opportunity to wrap her arms around her husband. “I love you,” she whispered, with quivering lips. “Come home to us.”

“I will. I love you too.” He glanced towards the boys. “Stay strong,” he said, and kissed her one last time on the forehead before he pulled away.

Stay strong? She never had to be strong before. Why, when she had him? How could he expect her to protect their boys when she could barely get a grip on herself? She thought of yesterday and how afraid she had been that the storm would take one of them away from her. Searching for a source of strength, she focused on Melinda. The woman had a hard body and she moved it with purpose. Striding beside the men, she was poised and confident—an equal.

Ron sped ahead, revving his engine, enjoying the wind in his hair. “Hooeee! I have missed this!” He howled back.

Smiling, Melinda revved her engine and sped passed him, her red tail lights becoming smaller with distance, then brighter as she turned around the bend. Ron followed her lead and stood as he rode. Calvin laughed out loud, but stayed back with Jose and the Mayor. When they reached the bend, they saw the two tail lights at a dead stop.

“What in the world?” Jonathan shut off his engine and went to inspect the metal juggernaut that stretched beyond what the darkness allowed his eyes to see; it explained why the highway had been wide open.

“Wow! This must run for miles,” Jose said, as he dismounted the motorcycle then climbed over the concrete barricade. With the help of a flashlight, he saw that the impact of the crash had shoved the engine of the four-door sedan into the back seat. The car looked like an accordion, smashed between a concrete barricade and a snaking line of cars behind it. A skeleton remained crushed beneath the engine. “Judging by the direction the cars faced, every freeway lane had been used to travel south. So, why would someone put this barrier in a blind turn?” Looking left to right, he shook his head. “Blind turn from both directions? Makes no sense!” The spotlight from the flashlight gave Jose a glimpse of the hunks of concrete that still clung to the rebar used to reinforce the barriers.

Calvin also dismounted his motorcycle and moved through the cars on foot. As he weaved through the wreckage, he peeked inside of the cars against his better judgment. “Guys.” He gasped when he opened a door. “This is just gruesome.” Unsure what to expect, he’d placed a handkerchief over his mouth and nose.

“Oh my God,” Melinda whispered. Her own nose and mouth were covered with her arm.

“I thought the windows were darkened to keep out the sun... I never thought....” Ron approached behind Calvin and had to look away. The baby seat behind the passenger made him think of Railey and their upcoming baby. He couldn’t bring himself to look again.

The five of them stood next to the SUV’s open door, shocked into silence. They all knew exactly what had transpired, but Jose was the one who gave it voice. “The sun... the extreme heat... decomposition gasses built up... the corpses combusted and sprayed matter everywhere.” A run of the flashlight over the windshield showed a caked, dark, dry spray splattered against it. “Makes sense.” He was very matter-of-fact.

No one said it, but they all wondered how long it took for a body to look like that.

“How far do you think this goes?” Jonathan said, tracing the line of cars with his flashlight, until the light was swallowed up by the darkness in the distance. There seemed to be no end in sight.

“Only one way to find out,” Melinda said, leading the way.

There was no room to ride, so they abandoned their motorcycles. Backpacks strapped to their backs, they weaved through and around knots of tangled vehicles of all sorts. Sometimes, they had to backtrack to overcome a complete blockage of the road. The traffic jam spilled into the off ramps, shoulders, and surface streets. Some cars had been left off the roads all together, along the hill and mountainsides.

The seemingly endless gruesomeness relieved them of the euphoria they’d felt when they first took to the open road.

“It is weird. I keep hoping to spot a survivor.”

“Yeah, me too. Even though I know I’m wasting my time looking,” Melinda said, cognizant that none of the chaos before them was a result of a recent event.

There were no other sounds other than them and the noise they made as they cut, and sometimes threaded, their way through the ceaseless, gruesome traffic jam. Ron felt death around them as keenly as he felt the night's heat; and like the heat, he knew that gruesome scenes, like the one before them, had become a part of life.

"We're going to have to find shelter for the night." The big moon was plopped just above the mountain ridge and thinned the curtain of darkness. A scrabble of lifeless, leafless tree trunks dotted the mountainsides. Some tree trunks remained upright, others broken, and the rest fallen over. Jose stopped to look over the map with Calvin.

No one disagreed with Jose, but there wasn't anything they could do about it. The roads, even the roads off the highway, were congested with a crush of cars and big trucks. During their last break, Calvin and Jose confirmed that the city roads were no better than the freeway. At least the freeway was direct.

"Since we don't really know what's ahead of us, we'll get off the freeway at the next opportunity and look for shelter." Jonathan expected to have to veer away from the freeway in hopes of finding a suitable structure. They had to get looking if they were to have any prayer of finding shelter before the sun came up. Besides, ahead of them was a steep summit he thought could wait until tomorrow night.

Jose hadn't been the only one to look for foreign lights within the darkness. Aside from the fact that they all knew that an experienced survivalist would take care never to broadcast their location, the others had been just as hopeful.

They came across what had once been a rural one-horse town and breathed a sigh of relief.

"I sure am glad that we have that moon tonight," Jonathan said, tired of the beautiful starry nights. He wouldn't mind some city light pollution once in a while. "I've been in Yreka for the last five years. With the risks that come with travel, I haven't cared to venture too far out... furthest I'd gone was Shasta, before the mysterious murder of the residents. Haven't left the town since," Jonathan said, then looked over to Jose, who walked shoulder to shoulder with him on the road.

Ron caught up to Jonathan and Jose. As he walked between them, he looked around and said, "Just before I left Oregon, the power companies had stopped providing power to the people. Few had jobs, but most did not and couldn't pay. The unemployed, like

myself, had to choose between buying food and paying bills.” The reason Ron ended up in Yreka was because he had lost his home in Medford, Oregon, to foreclosure. His buddy, Calvin, had taken him in and helped him get back on his feet, which in Yreka, in today’s world, had nothing to do with money and everything to do with the ability to contribute to the community.

“Despicable... that we allowed any of this to happen to our country. So despicable... and unforgivable.” With acerbity that iced her words, Melinda continued, “What does it say about us when a compact machine can check your vision, give you a prescription, and provide a blood analysis, but only few can pay to use the service because the majority are unemployed? I will never understand how people believed that automating the labor force would be good for the people.”

The moon showed a glint of raw anger in her eyes. She had a right to be, and they did too. After leaving the military, she went straight to medical school to become an optometrist. It was bad luck that she graduated just as the new technology, Insta-Lab, flooded the market and priced her out of the field. At thirty-six, she was forced to re-enlist with the military to earn an income. The very next year, the U.S. Military was privatized and the contract was given to Zarant Military—a global conglomerate with global economic interests, not the American taxpayers’ interests.

Predictably, once the fields of phlebotomy, optometry, and lab analysis became completely automated, the price gouging began. Why not? The competition was gone and government was too weak to make demands of the global powers, those powers being the multinationals.

“There are two things I know for certain. One. Not all technological advances are good. Two. The U.S. Military should never have been privatized,” said Jonathan, wondering why prior generations could not see that. Or had it simply been convenient to ignore the risks?

Everything changed when the Military Chiefs were barred from enforcing the strict Military Code of Conduct, by Congress. Once word spread, chaos amongst the ranks ensued. Soon after, the U.S. Military was sold to private industry. It was later learned that those members of the House and Senate, those who voted *for* the privatization of the Military, had accepted an apartment within The One Building as a bribe. Those who

opposed the privatization were later redlined from the SF SunSafe and left behind, amongst the survivalists. There were also those who disappeared entirely.

The democratically elected President of the United States met with a different fate. She fought tooth and nail to stop the privatization of the Military, and even reverse technological advancements that displaced the human labor force, to no avail. Before she could veto the bill privatizing the Military, she was found dead in her own bed, shot between the eyes as she slept. Shot by the Secret Service agents assigned to protect her.

Hours later, her V.P., Jason Smith, signed the bill into law. With the stroke of a pen, and a few murders, Zarant Industries solidified its power over national governments around the world. For his troubles, Jason Smith received the second largest penthouse within the One Building inside of the SF SunSafe. He died a year later of a heart attack.

“Nine o’clock. It looks like a small structure.” A small, rickety house with brackish-white paint stood against the moonlight, amongst the dead trees. It had a rotted porch and a window in the front. The driveway leading up to the home was buried somewhere beneath hardened dirt and debris. Calvin stopped walking and squatted, as he brought the infrared binoculars to his eyes. Melinda and Jose followed his lead.

“Looks abandoned,” Jose said. He turned and handed his binoculars up for Jonathan to take.

Jonathan had squatted beside Jose while he used a red finger light to see as he annotated their movements on a map. He wanted a record of their travels kept for future reference.

Melinda passed her binoculars back to Ron, making a mental note to look for more binoculars, if they should come across a gun store with anything left in it. Each one of them should have their own gear, in case they were forced to split up for any reason.

Taking nothing for granted, they split up, guns drawn, and approached the seemingly abandoned home from two directions. Jose and Calvin climbed the porch while the rest stayed back and took cover behind dead trees. As Jose moved towards the doorway, the wooden floor gave way and his boot went through the porch. It made so much noise that if anyone was inside the home, they had been officially alerted to their presence.

Frustrated with himself, Jose carefully pulled his leg out of the hole and pressed himself against the wall. “Hello? If anyone is home, we are not a threat. We are only

seeking shelter from the day's heat." It dawned on him that the sky had lightened. His bulky military watch had both hands on the five. 5:25a.m. "Hello?" He called out as he kept the back of his head against the wall.

No answer. Calvin nodded at Jose and quietly backed up. He turned to the window and looked inside, then shook his head. No one.

Jose drew his gun and tried the doorknob. The door was unlocked. Back pressed against the wall, Jose pushed the door open with his boot: no sound or movement from within. Calvin looked inside. No one.

"Clear," Jose whispered and quietly moved into the living room.

It smelled of stale tobacco inside. Along the wall, facing the porch, sat a tattered couch. A square dining table took up most of the area adjacent to the couch, just off the small kitchen. They heard something scatter, and Calvin went to check.

"The home must have settled?" he guessed, since no one was in the kitchen with them.

"Go." Jose pointed, and they moved as a unit down the hall. Calvin took the door to the left. Jose took the door to the right. "Clear."

"Clear." Calvin nodded and they moved to the last door. When he nodded, with his back along the wall, Jose opened the door and closed it as quickly as he had opened it.

Mere moments later, with flashlights in hand, they opened the door again. They wore handkerchiefs tied over their mouth and nose. Two adolescent children had been shot dead in their beds. The woman, whom they presumed to be their mother, lay dead over the smaller one, a boy, as if protecting him as she died. A man's body remained on the couch, tucked into the corner, with half of his face and cranium blown off. A shotgun lay at his feet. On the small desk was a note.

"Desperation," Jose said, after he read the note. "Calvin?" Jose held out the note for him to read.

Ten

The next night.

Unable to resist, Diana found herself in Lazador's control room rewatching the feed from Gary's and Clarence's neurochips. They hadn't gone too far on the motorbikes before they had to turn back. The highways had been clogged with cars and death. Hardened human matter darkened the inside of cars where human bodies had fully decomposed. Their handheld spotlights revealed the chaos that seemed to sprawl across the whole of the dead terrain. So much death. Most of the corpses were still inside of the cars, though quite a few could be seen scattered across the landscape.

Claudia slipped into the control room to gather a couple items she'd left behind.

Diana was absorbed by her thoughts and had yet to notice Claudia's entrance.

No options, Diana thought. No horizons. No nothing. So many hopeless people with only a dead end to look forward to. She wondered what their last thought had been as their lives left their bodies? Had they feared death, or had they welcomed it? Had they been grateful that their struggle would soon be over? Grateful they would no longer have to sit stagnant in a life void of quality and substance? The unanswered questions forced a void into Diana's soul. Suddenly, she felt despairingly empty.

"The answers won't come on their own, Diana," Diana had spoken the thought to herself as she focused on a bare, human skeleton that was almost luminescent under the moonlit sky. She hit the pause button so that the hologram floated before her. A profound yearning had taken ahold of her. She knew with certainty that she *had* to see the madness of humanity that thrived in the world above ground, and that she had to see it with her own eyes. "I must see it for myself."

“It is unfortunate that going above ground is not permitted.” Normally, Claudia kept her comments to herself, but she knew by Diana’s tone that she meant to go in search of her own answers.

The sound of Claudia’s voice caught Diana by surprise. Not willing to allow herself to be intimidated by a thirty-four-year-old, Diana cast a challenging glare at Claudia.

Claudia felt herself take an involuntary step back.

“I am sorry, Claudia. I didn’t realize that I was asking you for permission,” Diana charged.

They were in the control room, which was in the process of being transformed into an Operations and Command Center. Four laptops sat stacked on a long hologram table, a cable tethered each laptop to the central server.

Carolina walked in and sensed the tension in the room. “Sorry, ladies. I have got work to do.” Carolina was a network engineer, one of the handful of new Lazador graduates.

“We won’t be in your way,” Diana replied and gestured for her to come in.

Not appreciating the interruption, Claudia turned and caught Carolina’s eye. Carolina flinched and quickly buried herself in her work. Frustrated, Claudia took a deep breath. It was not that Claudia wanted to dictate what Diana could, or couldn’t do. It was that what Diana wanted to do was far too dangerous. Gary’s and Clarence’s above ground experience had shown that. Also, she cared too much for Diana not to try and stop her.

“Diana, going above ground would be irresponsible of you.”

“I am not a child,” Diana snapped back. “I know that it is dangerous. What I find irresponsible is our lack of information about the world above ground. How will future generations learn from our mistakes if history is never recorded?”

Diana was Lazador’s most senior member and Claudia was the founder’s daughter. Both women were strong willed and extremely independent.

“Diana, you know it’s too dangerous out there. Clarence and my father had to turn around and come home only hours into their expedition. I know you don’t need me to tell you this, all of those dead people are proof enough. And what will you do if you come across living people? Do you remember what they did to Clarence’s van?” When Diana showed no signs of relenting, Claudia tried another route. “If you’d like, we can contact my father and see what he has to say. I am pretty sure he’s still here.”

There were few people left in the world that impressed Diana. Claudia's astuteness and mental agility that enabled her to easily navigate changing, stressful situations had long ago gained Diana's admiration. Case in point, Claudia saw that Diana viewed her through the lens of a parent, so she used the resources available in the room to give herself some perceived authority. Before Diana knew it, Claudia had placed herself before the podium, with the Masai Warrior's powerful image at her back to bolster her image of authority.

The eight-by-six oil on canvas of a Masai Warrior stood sentry on the wall behind the main podium. The commitment and dedication to protecting his people had been captured in the Warrior's liquid black eyes. The Masai Warrior was the metaphor for the protector Claudia aspired to become. She would protect her Nest and its people, starting with Diana.

"Claudia, I've never taken you over my lap and spanked you, but I promise you that if you get in my way, I will do it." She raised her two gnarled hands. "These won't stop me." Reaching to collect an object off the table, she continued, "This is the kind of history that *needs* to be recorded, even if it means putting my life at risk. It must be recorded. *I* must record it." Diana ran a gnarled knuckled hand over the table top, in a straight horizontal line. "If mankind ever recovers from this calamity that is our existence, they will need to know our history... they will need to *see* that we brought on our own near extinction."

"Diana. I... it's too dangerous out there." Claudia held her ground, but barely. "I can't in good conscience let you go alone. Besides, how would you get around?"

"Diana, you ready?" Jimmy bobbed in, smiling as usual.

"Ah," Diana said. "Perfect timing." Turning to Claudia, she added, "I never said that I was going alone."

Disbelieving her eyes, Claudia took a step forward. Jimmy was absolutely not capable of navigating the risks they would encounter above ground. Neither was Diana. If they followed through with Diana's insane plan, they would be putting both of their lives in danger.

"Diana, I can't—"

"I'm not asking you for your permission."

"Jimmy—"

“Neither am I.” Jimmy stood tall and square of shoulders. If the situation were not so serious, Claudia would have mussed his hair and teased him. She had to remind herself that he was a man now, capable of making his own decisions.

Claudia stood back a tad. Jimmy had never before asserted himself with her, or anyone else that she knew of. Worried that he didn’t understand what he was getting himself into, she pleaded, “It’s dangerous out there. There are sudden storms. The sun. There may even still be roving bands of armed robbers.”

“I know, Claudia. Remember... I lived out there before Gary rescued me. Besides, I am the one who asked Diana to come with me.” Jimmy had prepared himself for several hours that morning, mustering up his courage to follow through and go with Diana. Claudia would not talk him out of it.

With one blink of the eyes, Claudia was able to wipe away some of the shock. “You? Why?”

Carolina showed her own surprise at Jimmy’s initiative when she looked up from her work station. After a brief moment of gawking, she shook her head, shrugged, and went back to work.

“I have my reasons.” Jimmy pursed his lips and raised his chin in nervous defiance. Claudia intimidated him and it showed.

From the day they moved into Lazador’s Nest, Edward forbade Jimmy from going above ground. Every time he asked for permission, Edward fed him some new excuse to keep him below ground. Well, last week he overheard Mildred say something about being above ground; something to do with the warm night air touching her bare skin. He too would like to feel the warm night air on his skin. Besides, during Edward’s and Mildred’s whispered conversation, Edward mentioned how amazing it would be to be the person that documented life above ground for future generations. He likened that person to being the Ken Burns of their generation. Jimmy did not know who Ken Burns was, but he sounded like a person people admired. Edward and Mildred both seemed to admire him, and he wanted their admiration. He was tired of them rolling their eyes at him as if he couldn’t see them. It was hurtful.

Exacerbated, Claudia balled her fists. She couldn’t wait to receive her own neurochip so that she could summon some help with a simple thought. Until then, she had to do

things the old-fashioned way. “Okay. You two... wait here. I need to get Edward.” Claudia had enough to worry about without worrying about Diana and Jimmy. Gary was in the Technology Lab getting ready to Transport to his meeting with General Garret, using the Transport technology that had only been tested on three frogs, one of which had half its torso materialize in a concrete slabbed table.

Jimmy nodded and Diana smirked. “Hurry it up. I will not wait all day.” Diana had no intention of waiting even one minute after Claudia left.

As soon as he exited the Transport portal, Gary felt himself to make certain that he was still whole. Woozy, he stood still for a moment to allow his body’s senses to reorient. He believed that what he felt right then were lingering effects from Transporting. It had been a strange sensation, euphoric even. There had been a sense of levity pushing up against a heavy invisible weight that sat on him. It felt like that confusing feeling of reaching for something you knew was tangible but became intangible when your hand wrapped around it.

Ninety-six seconds ago, Gary had stepped into the Transport portal in Kisenya’s lab, inside of Lazador’s underground Nest, and Transported to San Francisco. His mass had moved 210 miles in ninety-six seconds! With a brimming smile, he looked over himself one more time. Everything seemed to be where it should be, so he sent a mental chat to the Nest to let them know he had arrived, and that all was well. Once the message had been sent, he promptly untethered his neurochip from Lazador’s server as a precaution. Until Gary knew more about Garret and his urgent need to meet, it behooved him to avoid emitting a traceable radio frequency, especially when it pinged directly to the Nest’s server.

As soon as he realized where, exactly, he was, Gary felt his heart fill with a warmth that was then tempered by sadness. The Legion of Honor lay in ruins before him. Its dark silhouette—which seemed cut out of the gray skies of the early morning—depicted a graceful giant brought down onto one knee. Thick concrete columns, crowned with capitals that once stood proud, like sentries on a wall, now tilted, slanted, and buckled. The roof, snapped into a convex shape, sat atop it all like a broken crown. Disgusted, Gary put the flashlight away and turned to face the brightly lit San Francisco SunSafe.

From east to west, the illuminated SunSafe sprawled over every inch of the old city. Glass skyscrapers thrust up into the night sky and ran all of the way down the Peninsula. Sleek glass tubes, called Skywalks, bridged the towering buildings at various floors. Although he was loathe to admit it, the SF SunSafe was spectacular to look at. It was a brightly-lit crystal city surrounded by a sea of darkness.

Perspiration beaded on his forehead before Gary took the first step towards the SF SunSafe, which sprawled out before him. Along the way, a nostalgic emotion struck his core when he walked past an intact Victorian.

Where are the transients? Steven and Yesenia had described the city's old streets as drowned under an endless sea of homeless humanity. Given that description, and what he and Clarence saw along the highways and roads, Gary had expected to find a human mass of misery swarming the SunSafe's peripheral streets. And yet, as far as he could tell, he was the only one outside of the self-contained SunSafe city.

From a distance, all Gary could see were small specs moving around within the massive network of breathtakingly tall buildings. The specs were the residents who lived within, it all reminded him of the glass-encased ant's nest he'd had as a boy. The skyscrapers were interconnected by a maze of glass Skywalks that seemed to never end. Admittedly, he found the hundreds of gorgeous, bright, glass structures that reached up until they pierced the night sky both mesmerizing and disorienting.

According to Garret's last message, there should be a hidden door at the base of the building immediately to the left of the One Building. From elevated ground, he had easily spotted the immense structure on the northeast edge of the SF SunSafe, where the Bay Bridge fed in. The One Building towered over the other high-rises; it reached higher and was wider than every other structure in sight. It was so big that Gary thought it could be a city unto itself.

Seeing the SunSafe in person put a lot of what Yesenia and Steven said into perspective for Gary. There were at least forty feet of smooth concrete base on each high-rise. After the concrete base, UV safe, lead-laced glass was used for the remainder of the structure. The SunSafe's border had been cleverly incorporated into the design, just as Yesenia had described. Gary shook his head. It finally made sense how a sea of homeless

had filled the old San Francisco city streets, yet remained *outside* of the SunSafe city. The high-rises were void of street level access and their bases appeared unscalable.

Sweat quickly saturated Gary's clothing and he wondered how his body could have any moisture left. Not since before he moved below ground had he sweated so much. A curse left his lips as he pulled the clingy shirt off his skin.

A sudden light breeze kissed his sweat-soaked skin and sent a tingle through him. He tugged on his shirt again, this time to let the breeze in, but it had kicked up and died almost as quickly. It had only been enough air movement to make the hair on his arms stand at attention and put him on high alert. A look towards the night sky told him nothing. He couldn't see beyond the brightly lit high-rises that shot to the sky all around him.

There was no accessible shelter in sight. Trying not to panic, Gary counted out sixty seconds. Nothing. Another sixty seconds. Nothing. Two full minutes passed without a breeze. After another three minutes passed, the air remained as still as a leaf on the ground. Not to get too far ahead of himself, Gary allowed himself to breathe a short sigh of relief. And then, when he least expected it, a strong gust of wind kicked up and knocked him onto his hands and knees. Once again, the wind died. Within half a second, Gary was ping-ponged around by wind gusts strong enough to lift him off the ground.

It was no use seeking shelter inside of a SunSafe building, he'd already assessed they were inaccessible from the outside at street level. Trying to breathe while the wind tried to suffocate him, he wracked his brain until he recalled the two slumping Victorians he'd passed not long ago. The wind bullied him and sent him in directions he hadn't intended to go. Finally, he gained some footing and leaned forward for purchase against the wind. All he could do was hope he wouldn't get blown away, or body slammed into a building, as he retraced his footsteps.

The windstorm strengthened. Gary looked up and saw that the skyscrapers swayed against the wind and decided the time had come to give up on the meeting. He would have to find a way to reschedule with Garret. As he prepared to open a Transport portal, a sand-filled gust slapped him and forced him to turn his face. When he blinked away the sand, he spotted a small two-story structure just beyond the next building.

Gary protected his face with his arms as best he could and ran for the small, abandoned structure. As soon as he got through the building's front door, he slammed it shut. Getting

in hadn't been difficult since dry rot had long ago compromised the wooden door. Gary kept his back pressed up against the door to keep it shut while he searched for a safer spot. The building was empty and had few places to safely ride out the storm. The only option he had was the far-left corner of the room, the one furthest from any doors and windows.

No sooner had Gary scurried across the room and tucked himself into the corner, than the door blew open and slammed against the wall. The door splintered into deadly airborne projectiles upon impact. By then, the wind had begun to wail and make the walls and broken windows rattle. As it further ratcheted up its strength, it tugged and pulled at the small structure. Worried he'd already taken too long to reach the SF SunSafe, and that he wouldn't have another chance to meet with General Garret, Gary pushed away the want to Transport back to the Nest. Instead, he curled himself into a tight ball and buried his face between his legs to ride out the storm tucked into the corner.

Outside, the tempest wind howled. The aged, frail Victorian structure groaned, shook, and heaved in response. When the roof clattered wildly, the building shook with it. Burrowed in his little corner, Gary imagined the cement and rebar fortified wooden frame as it clung to the foundation by its literal nails. Minutes later, the wind calmed and the temperature dropped. Little white orbs—hail—were then pelted into the two-story home through every available opening.

And then, just as suddenly as the storm had begun, it ended.

Instantly, the air warmed and stilled. The entire ordeal lasted under ten minutes; and yet, it felt like a thousand lifetimes. Gary likened it to riding a rollercoaster, and he hated rollercoasters. When he finally abandoned his corner and stepped out of the whimpering building, he found that a few patches of hail still remained. Instinctively, he looked up at the nearest skyscraper and wondered what the experience had been like in there. Then just as quickly, he hoped never to find out.

It took a little bit of backtracking and some getting lost, but he finally stumbled upon the One Building. Its base took up five city blocks—the One Building was a ginormous structure.

Standing back to get a better look didn't help. The One Building was far too big to see its total immensity from the ground, so he settled and admired its breathtaking girth.

Gary walked to the adjacent building and walked around its base. Like the rest of the skyscrapers, he walked by, there was no sign of a door. He did, however, identify a set of boot prints that disappeared into the smooth concrete base of the building. Bingo! The door had to be there. But what Gary assumed would be an easy find, was not. It took him another twenty frustrating minutes of feeling around for a door. Finally, he inadvertently struck a pressure point that revealed a keypad.

Wiping the adrenaline-induced sweat off his face, he punched in the code Garret sent him and held his breath. A nerve-wracking two-second interval lapsed before a door cut itself out of the concrete wall and slid open. Its thickness was surprising—ram proof. The steel was as thick as Gary's arm was long. To fortify it further, multiple mechanisms resembling that of a bank vault, including sliding rods and locks, were built into it. He suspected that when engaged, not even a tank could barrel through.

As soon as he stepped into the hallway, he bent down and touched one of the boot prints on the tiled floor with his forefinger—still wet. Military print. He knew by its look and took it as a warning to be extra careful. The hallway dumped into another hallway with only one way to go—left. Listening for other people, Gary blinked away the sweat, kept his back pressed against the white wall, and moved to the edge.

Around the corner from where he stood, he saw what looked suspiciously like an unused lobby with four long rows of sterile, white, plastic benches that lined the room. Directly behind the wall he had his back to, there was a small cubby with a large wooden desk and chair. Opposite to that was a lobby. Gary surmised it was a processing room of some type. It all appeared to be new and unused. Beyond that, a hallway splintered off with multiple doorways on each side. A bit of a strained look revealed that two of the doorways on the left belonged to the elevators. Gary grinned.

According to Gary's estimation, the elevators were about fifteen yards away, just beyond the lobby. All he had to do was take it to the sixth floor, which should be the first residential floor. He knew that he would have to take another elevator after that, but first things first.

Footsteps! They fast approached from somewhere beyond the elevators. How many? More than one person? The muffled conversation confirmed at least two people. Needing somewhere to hide, Gary searched for his best option. He verified that the coast was clear,

then slid around the wall into the cubby area, and dove behind the empty wooden desk. As soon as he got all the way under, a military boot stepped into the hallway.

Gary's heartbeat raced from the exertion and excitement. It had been too long since he last practiced his craft of espionage. His skills had dulled and he had aged.

The footsteps Gary hoped would pass through and keep going, unexpectedly stalled. Gary leaned forward ever so slightly to look through a narrow space between the desk and the wall. Two military guards had stopped at the elevators and appeared to be engaged in some conversation. They each held a weapon that resembled a clear plastic gun with a long muzzle. The military guard that was doing the talking was slender and hook-nosed. Gary heard him say something about his wife and her jealous streak. The other fellow, the person off to his left, a man that could easily be confused for a singular mass of muscle, said nothing and repeatedly shook his head, as if incredulous.

The two military guards didn't appear to be in any hurry to be anywhere. They remained in front of the elevators in conversation for a good fifteen minutes. Finally, the elevator pinged and the doors opened. A third guard came onto the floor and Gary rolled his eyes at his situation. The third military guard was tall and fit and rather scary looking. Realizing he was in her direct line of sight, Gary moved away from the seam and opted for listen-only mode by tucking himself fully under the desk.

The guards greeted each other with a curt nod.

"Hey, Maria. How did it go?" The muscle-massed guard asked, holding the elevator open.

Maria felt his eyes search her face for any telltale signs. She shrugged and said, "So far, I haven't noticed any changes. I went in and they implanted it through my nose." That explained the bruising around her eyes. "The procedure took all of an hour. They kept me there three hours for monitoring, then sent me home."

"Pain?" asked hook-nosed.

"None so far. Just a little disoriented. It's different, you'll see what I mean once you're implanted," she said, already walking away.

Gary listened to her footsteps grow fainter as she moved further away, but the two guards remained and had gone back to their conversation. Annoyed, Gary peered through the thin slit at the chatty guards in time to see the mass of muscle search his pockets for

his ID. As soon as he located it, he held it against the reader and pushed the button. Their conversation was cut the second the elevator doors closed.

Hold up! Garret sent him a PIN code, not an ID card. As far as he could tell, there wasn't a keypad anywhere for the elevators! It seemed clear, from what he could see, that a Zarant Military ID was required to access them. Gary decided that it was time to improvise and find an alternative route to the sixth floor. A stairwell would work. Before he could begin his search for one, the elevator chimed and the doors drew open. It took a doubletake and a blink of the eyes to confirm he had, in fact, seen Zachary. He exited the elevator in his custom-tailored suit and handsome black shoes. He was flanked by two muscular military guards.

Gary and Zachary had not seen each other in over fifteen years. Their last citing of each other happened because of an accidental run-in in DC that took place a few years before Gary went below ground with Lazador. He recalled walking away from Zachary, saddened by his depravity.

Senator Lila Duarte stepped out of the elevator behind them. She seemed to summon Zachary towards her as the guards walked ahead to give them privacy. Zachary and Lila locked in a hushed voice conversation; meanwhile, Gary, still beneath the desk, poked his head out enough to look around the room for another exit. There was a door behind the desk that Gary hadn't noticed because of the bushy fake plant in front of it. The keypad on the door gave him pause. As soon as Zachary and Lila's voices disappeared, Gary went to the keypad and entered the same code Garret provided for the door at the base of the building. Bingo! Relief washed over him.

Six flights of stairs later, Gary was winded and sweatier than when he'd been outside. As he slid past the door, the rising morning sun greeted him and his eyes began to water. Fifteen years had passed since Gary last saw real sunlight, which explained the increased discomfort he felt in his eyes as the sky brightened.

A woman watched as Gary stepped onto the elevator and made room for him beside her. She had taken pity on the man wearing a beige hemp shirt and pants, the prior of which had sweat rings under the arms and around the neck, the latter of which dirty knees from when he'd knelt in the corner of the abandoned building to wait out the storm.

“It’ll be alright,” the empathetic woman consoled Gary, confusing his sun-afflicted watery eyes for tears of despair.

“Thank you. Floor sixty-five, please,” Gary called out, before noticing that every floor had already been selected.

After a brief wait, he heard the elevator doors shut. Seconds later, the elevator stopped again. “Seventh Floor,” a soothing female voice called out of the overhead speakers and people began jostling towards the door.

Seventh floor? They had travelled one floor.

Each time the elevator doors opened fewer people squeezed out than crammed in. By the time they reached the nineteenth floor, the elevator had become overcrowded and the doors stood only a couple of millimeters from Gary’s nose. Eventually, he had been shuffled to the far back of the glass elevator.

Behind the elevator, and all around the SF SunSafe, lead-laced glass skyscrapers thrust into the sky. Every structure gleamed beneath the sunlight they reflected and refracted away, creating a prism of color around the SunSafe—like an aura of light. If it hadn’t been so blinding to look at for his sensitive eyes, he would have taken a moment to admire it.

By the time Gary and the elevator reached the sixty-fifth floor, his vision was better, albeit still watery. Finally able to focus on his surroundings, Gary realized that everyone around him wore a skintight, beige bodysuit—everyone, regardless of their age and build. As Gary pondered the purpose of wearing such a uniform, a man who very much resembled an egg in his skintight suit walked by. After that, Gary decided he’d better focus on where he was going.

Finally, Gary’s eyes stopped watering and he was able to see without the sunlight stinging his eyes. The décor and color scheme of the SunSafe struck him as monotonous and monochromatic: The floors were white. The bits of wall that were not glass were white. The seats in the lobby were cream-colored and looked uncomfortable. And, there were no plants or art to add pizzazz and engage the mind. Doldrum.

A labyrinth of Skywalks and hallways that splintered from the octagonal floors and connected to adjacent buildings at various levels was impressive. Like spokes on a wheel, each Skywalk led to another building.

The directions Garret provided had been clear and concise. Gary oriented himself to face west and began to politely cut through the throng of bodysuit wearing, loitering residents. It perplexed him to witness the way the residents sprinted away from him as if they thought his penurious condition contagious. He took the first Skywalk on his left and followed it to the end. The Skywalk led him to the lobby of a condominium skyscraper dotted with white tables and benches, all of which were occupied by residents in their quintessential beige bodysuits.

Gary's sweaty and necessitous appearance attracted disapproving glares and glances from the SunSafe residents, to which he took umbrage. One man in particular locked eyes with Gary, as though he could be intimidated by a skinsuit wearing man who resembled a puffed marshmallow with legs. Gary felt that *he* should be the one to dispense disapproval at those who thought it a good idea to squeeze into such unflattering attire.

The coffeehouse, like everything and everyone he's seen so far, also suffered from a monochromatic color pallet. The most interesting item in the café was the length of the long, cream-colored counter that ran the length of the room. The eggshell-colored walls added nothing, and neither did the eight white, evenly spaced, faux-leather stools on nickel legs lined up along its face.

A visual survey of the room catalogued a woman who sat on the stool nearest the entrance. Like everyone else, she wore the skintight, cream-colored bodysuit. Gary would have engaged her, but she seemed to be engrossed with some faraway thought. Garret hadn't arrived, so Gary looked for a somewhat private table and spotted one in the back of the café—it sat alone, somewhat segregated from the other tables. The nearest group would be the group of four senior citizens who were huddled over their table, Gary focused on their coffee mugs and took it as a good sign.

The girth of the people gave Zachary the impression that the SF SunSafe was a land of plenty for those who were lucky to have been let in.

No one was behind the counter, so Gary took the initiative to seat himself. As he walked by a nearby table, a giggling girl drew his attention. She was cute with her pigtails and beige bodysuit that fit her more like a jumper. The parents, on the other hand, were a layer of ripples contained by their cream bodysuits, which made them look like squished marshmallows. Gary gave them an apologetic smile for staring before he realized they

could neither see nor hear him. But if he took a string and traced their line of sight, it would go right to him.

He gawked even though he tried not to. He was directly in front of their table, maybe two feet away. From there, he waved—nothing. Odd. There were not any visible electronic gadgets or earbuds that he could see. His attention spilled over to the knot of teenagers who sat around two conjoined tables. They exhibited the same behavioral pattern, only their point of focus began just above their heads.

Abstract fear suddenly nipped in the back of his mind, something the female Zarant Military guard said as she got off the elevator. She had talked about an implant through the nose. It hadn't raised any flags when she said it, but it did now—they're getting neurochipped. The part Gary found most frightening was Zachary, he was too dangerous to be given that much power over the people.

Why would the population consent to being implanted with neurochips? It was no secret that the technology could be manipulated. Did they somehow believe that Zarant Industries wouldn't abuse the power the neurochips gave them? *Unbelievable!*

A loud whooping sound startled him and yanked his attention back to the café. At another table, a young, handsome man stood and swatted at something that wasn't there; and yet, his friends clearly saw whatever it was. Some swatted at the air with him, though they kept their seats. The others in their group laughed loudly. No one else in the coffeehouse, other than Gary, seemed to hear them, or care.

The worrying feeling returned and scratched at the back of Gary's mind, like a fingernail scratching a scab. Two of the boys shrieked in unison. Before long, they too reached up and began to swat at something, which invited another gaggle of laughter from the group. No, he didn't like what he saw at all.

Movement outside of the coffeehouse drew his attention. People had come out and filled the Skywalks, but Gary focused his attention on two older women. They looked to be in their eighties, clad in skintight body suits as they hobbled along using walkers. Gary could not help but shake his head. The outfits seemed uncomfortable, unattractive, and likely impractical.

Gary's thoughts wrestled with his conscience as he processed the information his eyes absorbed. Should he confront Garret about the neurochipped populations? At the moment,

Gary couldn't think of one explanation he would accept. The world didn't need more proof that the multinationals, under Zachary's leadership, were power and wealth consolidators at all costs to society. Disappointed, he chose the seat that kept his back to the city and kept an eye on the café's entrance for Garret.

The meet time was supposed to be 8:00a.m., and General Garret was now officially, and uncharacteristically, five minutes late. Trying not to let concern get the best of his thoughts, Gary turned his attention to the four senior citizens gathered a couple of tables over. From what he could extrapolate from their behavior, they were immersed in a board game that only they could see.

Neurochip technology had been developed to be the "next generation" cellphone. The concept had been to implant neurochips into the population's hippocampus and then tether them to a main network. After that, an individual need only think about an item and an "Ad Thought", or advertisement, pinged their brain. That ping sent a strong "fear of missing out" signal to the brain. That FOMO signal was satisfied with the release of a large dopamine dose to the brain, only when the consumer purchased the item. It was the latter part of the process that caused pause with the lawmakers—the neurochip's ability to govern the brain. It took a rare bipartisan move, but Congress successfully blocked the technology from going to market.

Gary should have guessed that Zachary would also seek out the technology.

The imaginary game piece was pinched by the small, feminine fingers of the wafer-thin woman who moved "the piece" two skips to the left. The players took their turns moving their "game piece" with enthusiasm. Darting eyes covered the imaginary gameboard, analyzing and calculating their next moves. Every so often, one of the players would laugh and the rest would join, or a sigh of frustration would summon a pat on the leg from a teammate. After several minutes of playing, the heavyset man with an eggplant nose, bald head, and potato body triumphantly shot his hand to the right and dramatically released his game piece. The woman next to him, presumably his partner, became giddy and clapped her hands rapidly. At the same time, his competitor clenched his square jaw and gave a defeated slap to his knee. All four laughed but never looked at each other, at least not at their physical beings around the table.

Everyone in the coffeehouse was tethered to something, even the woman at the bar, the very one Gary thought too preoccupied with a thought. She held a coffee mug in the left hand and used her right hand to “turn the page” of an imaginary book suspended before her. The sight of her coffee mug made him, once again, wonder where the waitstaff was. He looked past the woman to the kitchen doors, but he was too far away to see anything through the foggy plexiglass. He really wanted a cup of coffee.

Lazador ran out of coffee several years back. With limited resources below ground, coffee couldn’t be allocated space in either the vertical greenhouses, nor the storage rooms. So, when the small stash in his personal living quarters also ran dry, he was out. In retrospect, it had been harder to ween himself off coffee than it had been to ween off meat. The caffeine withdrawal headaches had been the worst part for him because they lingered.

The last update on the Americas’ traditional coffee growing region had it under a perpetual conveyor belt of water-dumping cyclones. Diana’s last living childhood friend in Brazil mysteriously disappeared five years ago. His last message described the Amazon as drowned and fully submerged under stagnant bodies of water. The region, he warned, had become an incubator of deadly plague and virus-carrying parasites.

A squeamish gasp distracted him from his thoughts. The teenagers went from watching something flutter above their heads, to recoiling and raising their feet onto their chairs. Their heads swam around as their eyes followed some imaginary creature that presumably swam about beneath them.

“Gary!” Steven was sorely sorry that they could not sit and talk. They had not seen each other since he and Yesenia left Lazador’s Nest.

Startled, he turned to see Steven walking towards him in a lab coat and beige jumpsuit that looked more like overalls than a skintight bodysuit. “Steven! Wait—”

“No time.” Steven took him by the elbows and almost forcefully led him to the bathroom. “We have to find a way to get you out of here without you walking out the front doors.” Needing to buy time, he led Gary to the bathroom. “I don’t know what’s happened to Garret, but Roberto sent me an urgent communication to come and meet you.” Steven looked at his watch. “You must go, Gary. Roberto said that you were

identified by the facial recognition cameras.” Steven climbed onto a toilet to try and reach the ceiling tiles, but they were too high.

“Get off there,” Gary said, pacing back and forth as he gathered his thoughts. Roberto? Who is Roberto? “Did this Roberto tell you why Garret wanted to meet with me in person?”

Too much anxious energy had mixed with Steven’s blood for him to pause and wonder how Gary got from Reedley to the SF SunSafe. “Gary, are you not hearing me? You are in imminent danger. We have to find a way to hide you until it’s safe for you to leave the bathroom again! Zarant Military... They’ll be here any minute and they’ll break down that door to get to you.” Steven also had a pile of questions for Gary, but now was not the time.

“I’m in their criminal database?” Why would Zachary bother to put him into the SunSafe’s database? He shook his head and said, “It doesn’t matter. Right now, I need you to locate your friend Roberto. I have questions for him,” Gary said, checking the two other stalls to make sure they were empty.

“So do I,” Steven replied. One, in particular, made him momentarily forget the danger they were in. *They*, because if they were found together, Steven would be arrested with Gary. “Gary, how do you know General Garret?”

“We used to work together.”

“But *he* is Zarant Military’s General! His allegiance is to Zachary!” Steven couldn’t understand why Gary would jeopardize Lazador’s Nest to meet Garret. Suddenly he had so many more questions!

“We met during the SunSafe migration, two years before Lazador’s Nest was completed. We both belonged to an anonymous group of individuals who fought to prevent Zarant Industries from receiving the USA SunSafe cities contracts and nearly succeeded, but Zachary’s wild card, Senator Lila Duarte, suppressed troves of verifiable evidence of corruption, bribery, and strong-arming. We remained friends after that. Now, I want to talk to this Roberto!” Gary insisted.

Steven eyed Gary nervously. Why was Gary not doing more to help get him out of there. “Gary. Gary! We must get you out of here!”

As if just then remembering that Steven was there, Gary gave a thoughtful nod, went to the bathroom door and cracked it open.

Entering the coffeeshop were three military guards. Not one of the neurochip-tethered coffeehouse guests noticed the military guards as they went from table to table, searching for Gary.

“Steven, I need you to walk out of this bathroom like nothing has happened. Do it now,” Gary said, as he walked into a stall and shut the door. “Leave the bathroom, now.”

“What is that?” A dark, rectangular doorway opened up and hung a foot off the ground. It had swallowed up the stall door. “Gary?”

Not answering his question, Gary took a step into the *doorway* and was gone. A second later a military guard entered the bathroom as Steven walked out of the stall Gary should have been in. He pretended to fiddle with his lab coat.

Eleven

The sound of small, shuffling feet over a wet sidewalk cut the deafening silence and amplified the empty feel of Tracy, CA, one more abandoned middle-class city. Close behind, over the same fissured sidewalk, where a concrete slab had been lifted on one side by the root of a fallen dry-rotted tree, a louder set of footsteps followed.

“Star-filled skies from here to eternity... do you see that, mamma?” Ronan turned to Rose as she stepped off the porch.

Rose had a heavy, can-filled sack over her aching right shoulder. Relief came when she momentarily put the bag down to look up. The trickle of sweat beads ran down her scalp before they were licked up by the purple bandana tied around her hair.

“I do,” Rose said, and looked down at Ronan. He stood at her side and stared up at the night sky. Rose saw his relief that the violent storm had passed. “Star-filled skies.”

It was impossible to ignore how adorable Ronan looked in his outgrown pants that stopped somewhere between his ankles and his calves, topped by an oversized yellow T-shirt that hung to mid-thigh. The cuteness was enhanced with a thick, chocolate-brown mop of hair and beautiful brown eyes. The innocence in his eyes made Rose want to take him into her arms and ask him to never grow up.

“Thank God,” Ronan said.

“Ronan.”

“I know. I am sorry,” Ronan replied.

“It’s not a reprimand, just a reminder.”

Ronan nodded.

Dr. Rose Garcia abandoned the concept of God years ago, long before the famine struck. Her metamorphism to atheism was a gradual one. Religion had peeled away from

her belief system, one catastrophic event at a time. In her mind, the impetus of her faithlessness occurred during the pinnacle of the homeless crisis that swept the country. The crisis had been preventable with a little meaningful interdiction to limit the effects of greed, but none came. Not from some almighty God, and certainly not from the government.

“No God could be so cruel,” Rose said, then changed the subject before depression sunk its claws into her. “Ronan, where is your sister?” The past was out of her control, she reminded herself as she hoisted the bag over her shoulder again.

“I’ll get her,” Ronan said and traipsed back, into the home they had just come out of.

As easily as water finds its way through a crack, Rose’s thoughts drifted into the past:

“Dr. Garcia. There are so many of them... and they just keep coming!” The sight of Zarant Military invoked fear in the heart of all who saw them. Dr. Rose Garcia was no exception.

Rose was at the hospital ward window when Jasmine approached. The parking lot below had become a full-fledged refugee camp that spilled into the streets of Oakland and the neighboring cities, including the depression that had once been Lake Merritt. Floodlights illuminated patches of red, blue, and purple that quilted the scene—tents had been pitched in every plot of space available.

Tent cities housed rural and suburban Americans who abandoned their jobless, bankrupt communities and migrated to the big cities. Most of the migrants never made it in. Zarant eventually barricaded all entry points to San Francisco.

From her perch, Rose watched as Zarant Military guards in white sun-suits entered the patchwork seams below, knocking tents down, and herding the frightened people into manageable, isolated clusters.

“They arrived at around seven this evening, something about healthcare and inoculations for the people in the camps,” said Jasmine.

The young idealist breathed a sigh of relief. Rose gave her a sideway glance and felt compelled to disabuse her of any illusions she may have regarding the multinationals’ philanthropic efforts.

“Chariness is always best practice whenever the multinationals are involved,” as the words left Rose’s lips, a cluster of soldiers in hazmat suits walked out of a moving lab. Their presence gave weight to her warning.

The sight of hazmat suits caused consternation amongst others who were at the window with Rose and Jasmine.

“Caution and skepticism,” Jasmine whispered the words, suddenly frightened. “Those hazmat suits worry me. Why do they need them?” Jasmine croaked with a sudden dry throat.

Turning to Jasmine, Rose noticed several other nurses at the windows. More gathered with every minute that passed. Whispered conversations wafted just low enough to prevent her from hearing them clearly. As the floor doctor, she considered telling them to get back to work, but there did not seem to be a point. Their patients were all dying. Without medical supplies, the nurses’ sole responsibility was pain management, and even that was in jeopardy, thanks to the dwindling morphine supply.

From one room, the moan of a dying man called forth a sob from a spouse. Footsteps moved from room to room in the background, topping morphine bags; only the sickest of patients received painkillers. Like everything else, medication had to be rationed, which meant that hospital floors were full of agonizing patients who had no access to relief.

Every pair of eyes at the windows followed the hazmat suits that moved below.

“No. There is no way that’s a good sign,” Rose rendered her zero confidence in the multinationals and their handouts. “I can’t recall a day when the multinationals put people over profit... no, this is not a good sign.”

A full head taller than Rose, Jasmine had an air of self-assuredness that intimidated some women and marveled others. Rose was of the latter cast. “Should we go down there and investigate?”

Rose stiffened and turned to Jasmine. Tilting her head up a tad, she looked straight into her eyes. “No.” The ice in Rose’s voice left no room for argument. “Jasmine, you can do no such thing. Zarant Military is dangerous. They arrest people indiscriminately, and those arrests usually result in missing people.” Jasmine understood and nodded slowly. “No. What you need to do is find Irigo and go get your son. Then, stay home until I confirm Zarant Military is gone.”

“But—”

“I can take care of the pain managing on my own. We have plenty of volunteer nurses available to help with the daily new arrivals.” Truthfully, they never had enough volunteers. There were so many new patients arriving each day that the top fourteen floors had beds lining the hallways with dying patients. They had begun adding donated cots, taken from the now defunct California National Guard, to supplement the lack of beds.

The increased number of patients with skin carcinomas and lesions popping out of their skin was only superseded by patients with viral diseases. Once novel viruses, they now found fertile soil to breed in within the overcrowded homeless camps. Lack of proper human waste disposal and sanitary maintenance allowed the disease-carrying rat populations to skyrocket. New patients were coming in with once long forgotten diseases, like typhus. Worst of all, the shortage of medical supplies across the nation made treatment impossible and allowed disease to spread unchecked.

A sudden power outage sent the hospital into darkness. The chaos outside became a star-filled sky with a nearly translucent sliver of a moon, pinned just above the brightly lit SF SunSafe in the distance. The city across the barricaded bay gleamed like the Emerald City.

“What happened to the power?” Jasmine grabbed onto Rose’s wrist.

“It is just a power outage. The backup generators will kick in shortly,” Rose said the words, but didn’t believe them. “You should go. Now.” Rose found herself almost yelling to be heard over the sudden trill of moaning and frightened cries that filled the hallways. “Nurses back to your patients!” The shuffle of feet could be heard, but little could be seen. Rose stood waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness.

“The morphine drips aren’t working!” a panicked nurse called out above the agonized screams that layered over each other.

“Doctor! Doctor! The respirator! She... she is dead!” A man shrieked in despair as the loss of his loved one socked him in the gut. Choked sobs folded into the pain filled melody that polluted the air.

“I need to find out what’s going on with those generators.”

Rose stopped Jasmine from running off to investigate. "No! Ronan needs you. I will handle this," Rose said, using her "Hospital Director" voice.

Ronan! Her son! Panic climbed on Jasmine's back and held on tight. Her son was at the neighbor's, not too far from the hospital. There could be military guards in the neighborhood. "You are right. I'll follow you down the stairs... would you tell Irgo to come home right away?" A dark foreboding built up inside of her.

"Of course," Rose said, as she led Jasmine towards the stairwell. But they did not get far.

"Stop! Do not go out there. Zarant Military has taken over the grounds. They are being aggressive. If you go down there, they might arrest you." Owen breathed hard as he spoke. He'd run up nine flights of stairs to warn them to stay put. "They just took Irgo." Rose instinctively put a hand on Jasmine's wrist to keep her where she stood.

"Irgo?" Jasmine asked. Dread filled her heart and sent tears streaming down her cheeks.

Unaware that Jasmine was Irgo's wife, Owen, in his matter-of-fact style, reiterated what he'd said. "They took Irgo when he tried to stop them from taking Darren. Now, they are both in custody." Without waiting for another word, Owen jumped back into the stairwell, presumably to warn the others on the top floors.

"Idiot!" Jasmine cried. Rose tried to comfort her, but Jasmine brushed her embrace away and tried to get around her to go to Irgo.

"Jasmine, there is nothing you can do. You are one person. You just have to hope they don't take him." Rose tried to talk sense into Jasmine before she did anything to jeopardize herself. "Do you understand?"

Gossip and panic ensued within the hospital. Those who overheard Owen say that two of their ranks had been arrested, passed the news around until it took off like wild fire.

It took Jasmine a minute, but she capitulated and nodded. No sooner had Rose relaxed than Jasmine ran past her and down the stairs. She had acted too fast for Rose to stop her.

"Irgo!" Jasmine screamed; her fear ricocheted off the concrete walls. In a full-fledged state of panic, Jasmin burst through the stairwell doors at ground level. Without any thought for herself or her son, Jasmine ran towards the wall of soldiers. "Irgooo!" The

hazmat suits gathered beneath a nearby tent stopped everything and watched her in shocked silence.

“Jasmine!” Irgo’s voice called out. “Go! Go back! Go home to Ronan!”

“Where are you?” Jasmine searched fervently for her husband. All she could focus on was on Irgo and his beautiful onyx eyes. One glimpse of his face, that is all she wanted. One glimpse to convince herself he would be back home soon. But where was he? “Irgo!”

“Jasmine! No! Turn back!”

As soon as Rose stepped out of the building, she spotted Jasmine and gasped when she saw her tilt forward to gain speed. She knew Jasmine was intent on ramming through the human barrier of armed soldiers.

“Jasmine, stop!” Rose called out, desperate to stop her.

A nerve-neutralizer was shot at Jasmine. Instantly paralyzed, her momentum halted and thrust her body back. Rose heard a blood curdling crack when Jasmine’s head hit the pavement. Shocked, Rose stopped running ten paces short of Jasmine’s lifeless body, close enough to see dark liquid puddling near her head. She held her hands up to shoulder height and began to back up slowly.

“Why would you do that?” Rose wept as she backed away with her hands in the air. “She is one of us! Working class! How can you turn on your own?” The armed military guards stood shoulder to shoulder; their eyes completely void of emotion.

“Ronan! Rose, please take care of our Ronan!” Irgo cried out from behind the wall of soldiers. “Tell him how much we loved him.”

“Her wagon is pretty full.” Ronan’s sweet voice pulled Rose back from the past. After fourteen months of having him, it was easy to forget that he wasn’t her biological son.

“Marti! Hon, we need to go!”

“Rose!” Marti’s excitement made her eyes grow as big as saucers as she exited the home and took a deep breath of fresh air. “It really rained! I can smell it!” Not paying enough attention to what she did, Marti turned sideways and pulled on the wagon handle to get it down the single step. “Oh, no!” She lifted her right foot out of an ankle-deep puddle. “Look what I did!”

Rain had stayed away from NorCal for years. The occasional hail storm came through, but dissipated too fast to ever be appreciated.

“Where have you been?”

The moonless night hid Marti’s grin. “Maybe Ronan can guess,” she toyed and kept her right hand hidden behind her back.

Ronan gripped Rose’s hand and his eyes bulged with anticipation. He had played Martina’s little game before. “What did you find, Marti? Is it something for me?” It was always something for him, and he knew it.

“Hmm. Well, let me think.” Marti was only three years older than Ronan, but it was all the excuse she needed to mother him. “Let us see. I found a box filled with little, spongy cakes—” A gasp escaped Ronan’s little mouth as he moved closer to Marti and her red wagon. Marti pursed her lips to disguise the smile she fought and failed to suppress. Ronan, almost too excited to contain himself, tried desperately to peek around her. “The cakes are filled with a dreamy, creamy, sweet cream.”

“Twinkies! You found Twinkies!!!!”

Rose laughed at how animated Ronan had become. Uncontained excitement had him jumping up and down when he tried and failed to get around Marti. Rose never dreamed she’d ever be grateful that Twinkies had an eternal shelf life.

“Where are they?”

“Here,” Marti said, just as Ronan snatched the spongy cake from her hand. “Hey, I was going to unwrap it for you.”

“Ronan, give that back to your sister!” Rose kneeled and faced him. “You cannot just snatch things from other people’s hands.”

The smile on Ronan’s little mouth melted and gave way to an apologetic pout as he held out the Twinkie for Martina to take back.

To survive on the run, Rose and Ronan learned to forage in abandoned homes for food and water. They became nocturnal. Sleeping away the hot daytime heat in basements had become the only way to avoid being brutalized by the sun.

Marti had picked up Rose’s and Ronan’s trail in Dublin, as they moved from one home to another. Marti would hide and stalk their movements, unsure if they were safe. The last

group of people she stumbled into had scarred her. The woman liked to beat her and treated her as her personal maid. It had been a miracle that she got away before the men had their way with her.

After a couple of weeks of Martina following Rose and Ronan from a distance, and after a particularly long day where they walked nearly twenty miles to the southern end of Pleasanton, Rose and Ronan chanced upon a relatively small home. Inside, they found that the underground bunker-style basement had enough food and water to last them a week, so they gleefully settled in and took a break from scavenging. It wasn't often that they could stay in one place for longer than a couple of days.

Three nights into their stay, Rose woke to Ronan's voice in conversation with a stranger. Fearing the worst, she dug her gun out of her cloth bag and quietly moved towards the voices. Every worst fear flew through her mind in those moments. Gun to her side, Rose quietly turned into the stairwell and startled all of them when she pointed the gun right at Marti's little head. The spitfire girl held her ground and told Rose to either put the gun away or shoot.

That night, Rose learned that Martina's father had tired of coping with the loss of her mother and little brother, so he put himself out of his own misery with a shotgun. Upon hearing that, Rose marveled to herself that the girl had been stronger than the man. After she covered her father's lifeless body with her own comforter, Martina had been left with no choice but to place a family portrait in her backpack and set out. Martina survived on her own for nearly four months, until she no longer had to go it alone. From then on, Rose and Ronan had become her little patchwork family.

"What was that crashing sound we heard during the storm?" Marti had never been so scared before.

A storm struck during the night as they scavenged for expired canned food items from an abandoned home in Tracy, California. Making the best out of a bad situation—the home they happened to be in when the storm came had no basement—Rose blew out all but one candle and herded the kids into the kitchen's dark pantry. They took shelter there from windows and flying objects. As they huddled on the floor, Rose told herself to ignore the fact that they might be blown away at any moment. At one point the storm had become

so vicious that the hairs on the nape of Rose's neck stood straight. She knew that every second the home remained on its foundation had been a miracle.

The storm's schizophrenic winds had ping-ponged between hair raising screams and purring whispers. On a few occasions, the winds sent the home into fits and convulsions. Wind gusts hurled objects at the home that made God awful sounds of destruction and demise when they crash landed. Through it all, the home had refused to capitulate to the wind's demand that it release itself from its foundation. When a thunderous crashing sound that shook every wall in the home sent Ronan into Rose's lap, where he curled himself into a ball like a frightened kitten, the home protested with a defiant groan. During it all, Rose forwent prayer and opted for cursing the storm. She kept her arms wrapped tightly around both children and protected them as though they had come out of her own womb.

Busy licking his fingers, Ronan ignored his sister's question. He had effectively inhaled the Twinkie and forgotten the scary storm.

"We may never find out," Rose said, looking but seeing little in the dark, nearly moonless night. Without light pollution from a city, and with only a sliver of moon pegged in the night sky, it was difficult to see the contrast between a structure's silhouette against the night sky.

Rose looked in her bag and down at the kids. "Let us see. I got green beans and kidney beans and mushrooms."

"No meat?"

Rose looked down at Ronan. They had been spoiled. A home they scavenged in the prior week had a couple of home canned hams in the pantry. One was inedible, but the other had been well preserved with a lot of salt. They nibbled on it all week, but now it was gone.

"Can we try one more home?" Marti asked, optimism laced her voice. "I want meat again. It was so good."

Rose looked at her watch and did the math in her head. They had two hours left before they had to get back to their "home" to avoid the sun's scorching rays. "Alright, but it will have to be quick." At the very least they would gather more vegetables, which would be good, since every scavenge was becoming less fruitful than the last.

“Yeah!” They screamed at the top of their lungs, before realizing what they had done.

“Sorry,” Marti said, looking around, making sure they were still alone.

“I’m sorry, mommy.”

Pushing away her fear, she reminded herself that Marti and Ronan were only children.

“Okay. It is okay. Let us just get inside... just in case.”

Inside the neighboring home, Rose peeked out of the windows, up and down the dark street for possible human silhouettes. She needed to reassure herself that the kids really hadn’t drawn any unwanted attention. So far, they’d been fortunate to have few interactions with other people. Rose suspected there were many more people like them, who scavenged to survive. And like them, they preferred to remain unseen. Times were hard and dangerous, which made everyone out there just as hard and dangerous, especially dangerous to a woman with two small children.

Marti fished for a short, fat, white candle from her backpack, where she kept several she’d collected along the way.

“Rose,” Martina said, and held out a candle for her to light, then realized Rose was busy with something else.

Rose covered the small kitchen window above the sink with aluminum foil to trap the candlelight in. Allowing her eyes to adjust to the total darkness, Rose said, “There. Now I’ll take that candle, Martina.” Martina handed her one and Rose lit it. “Let’s light one more, so we can see better.” Rose melted the bottom of the second candle and set it on a white dessert plate she’d taken from the dusty cupboard. Martina handed her the second candle. “Thank you. And remember, if it is canned, if its boxed and unopened, it goes into the sack. Maybe with this we will have enough to take a few days off.” Marti and Ronan liked the sound of that and smiled from ear to ear. Rose knew they could use a break. “Deal?”

“Deal!” They chimed in unison.

“Okay. Now stay together.”

Marti seemed mesmerized by a family picture that was still attached to the refrigerator door. Below, in green Crayola on a yellow sticky note, it read, “We lived here. Maya, Zenaida, Zeph, Gwen, Mommy & Daddy.” Children had lived in the home. Four of them, according to the photos plastered over the refrigerator. With only the candle for light,

Marti could barely make out their faces. She wondered whether any of them were still alive.

Six dusty chairs encircled the dining table, so Ronan dragged one into the kitchen. Wanting to be helpful, Ronan mounted the chair and climbed onto the kitchen counter. Rose spotted his calf-high pants and shook her head.

“No meat,” Ronan called out and Rose shook her head. He got off the countertop and moved the chair to the other side. He went through every cupboard on that side. “No meat and very few cans.”

Rose agreed. Unlike Ronan, she bagged the few cans that were there.

Ronan climbed off the countertop and the chair, and rummaged through the bottom cupboards. A huge grin spread over his lips. “Marti, look! Whoa!”

It was always a competition between Ronan and Marti to see who found the tastiest preserved food; meat was the greatest prize, beating out even Twinkies. Most times it was between a vegetable and a vegetable. Today, between the Twinkies and the small weenies Ronan had just uncovered, it was like hitting the jackpot—twice!

“Let me see!” Marti tried to push herself up, onto the counter, but stopped trying when Rose pulled the cans off the shelf and placed them on the counter.

“There are at least fifteen cans!” Rose said, excited. Any time they could have a little meat to supplement their usual canned bean and veggie meals, it was a treat.

A loud noise from the basement startled them and caused Rose to drop the can. “Marti... Ronan... time to go.” Fear gripped her. Someone was in the basement. She could kick herself for having let her guard down. First rule: always check the house and make sure you are alone. “Quietly,” she said, and tried to usher the kids towards the door, like a mother hen trying to corral her chicks.

“Mom.” Ronan’s voice quivered with fear as he and Marti reached the door to the living room, where a redheaded, pockmarked faced young man stood. His hair was thick and curly, giving him a Ronald McDonald tinge.

An old woman with gnarled fingers and a hunched back made an entrance a few seconds later.

Ronan gasped and drew himself back until he bumped into Rose. She placed a protective hand around him and maneuvered him behind her.

Ronan's little head peeked out of the right side of her legs, only enough to see the scary woman and the red-haired man. His startled eyes seemed glued on the old woman's gnarled hands, before tracing the curvature of her deformed spine.

"Who... who are you?" Rose asked, making sure they saw the gun in her hands. "Marti, get behind me."

Marti did as she was told. "Mom—"

That was a first. Martina had never referred to Rose as mom, which let her know just how afraid the poor girl was. Unlike Ronan, Martina saw Rose for what she was: a woman who would do everything in her power to protect them, and not a super hero.

"It'll be okay, sweetie," Rose said, wanting to reassure Martina and keep the fear she felt out of her voice. The redhead was the one that frightened her. "How many of you are there?" As soon as Rose asked the question, hers and Martina's eyes shot towards the basement door.

A visible quiver of relief was released by Martina when no other movement came from the dark stairwell that led to the basement. Guilt flooded Diana when she saw the girl's visceral relief.

Sight of the gun pointed at him forced Jimmy's hands into the air. Diana's instincts had been to do the same, but her sore arms wouldn't comply and she soon gave up. Diana spent the better part of the night behind Jimmy on a dirt bike with her arthritic arms wrapped around his waist. After a few hours of traveling, Jimmy had to keep one hand on the handles and the other holding onto Diana's hands. Jimmy decided to stop and get Diana some rest after her arms went numb. The exhaustion she felt in her body was all she could feel at the moment—exhaustion and frustration at having frightened the little girl when all they wanted to do was rest.

"We mean no trouble. We were in the basement trying to sleep when we heard you come in. We hoped you would be on your way, but... well... here you are." Jimmy grinned his silly grin, but Rose didn't reciprocate. The gun remained where Rose had it, pointed straight at him. "Please don't shoot me," he pleaded.

Diana shuffled forward and placed herself between Rose and Jimmy. "It is like he said. We are just trying to rest. We will be on our way again this evening," Diana croaked. Exhaustion drained her will to even speak loudly. "Please."

Cynicism had become a survival trait imperative in the world Rose inhabited with Martina and Ronan. No room remained for kindness or trust of any kind, or for anyone. Too many crimes against humanity had been perpetuated by everyday people who were “just doing their job”, or trying to survive.

Admittedly, Rose had lost her faith in God and in humanity. Besides, she had two children under her charge that she would protect with her own life.

“Who are you?” Rose asked, pointedly. The woman before her seemed ancient and wise, Shaman-like.

“Historians,” Jimmy said, beaming with pride. “We have been on the road for eight days! We are capturing life above ground.” Rose caught the subtle way Diana’s visage stressed when the redhead said, “Above ground, and I’ll be the next Ken Burns.”

“Above ground? As opposed to what?” Rose queried the redhead, her fear rising within. Historians? Above ground? Travelling for eight days? Only Zarant Military and the other multinationals would want to keep a record of the human misery their greed had inflicted on humanity. A sudden hyper protective awareness overcame Rose. Ronan and Marti had to be protected at all costs. “You are traitors!” The hand she held the gun with began to shake. It surprised her to realize she was debating whether or not she should shoot.

Reading the fear on Rose’s face, Diana nudged Jimmy to shut him up. Jimmy rarely picked up on cues. Unfortunately for Diana, it would not be one of those rare occasions.

“Our Nest,” Jimmy overshaded in his free-spirited way.

“Mom... look.” Marti pointed at a half-eaten apple in the old woman’s gnarled hand.

Rose’s breath caught in her throat. How had she not seen that sooner? “Ah... you... you have apples... and you call yourselves historians.” Rose recoiled. Any doubt she had, evaporated. “You’re Zarant Military!” Everyone knew that only the multinationals had vertical gardens to grow fresh fruit. The rest of the country had nothing. “You need to go! Now! I will shoot you!” Rose’s hand shook harder as she willed herself to follow through with her threat if they didn’t leave.

“What? No!” Jimmy replied. Repulsed. “We are—”

Rose stepped forward until the tip of the gun was a foot away from Jimmy's nose. Jimmy stopped talking and moved back, until he stood behind Diana. Marti was startled when he started crying.

"Mom—"

"Not now, Marti."

Diana marveled at the woman before her. She was determined to protect her cubs, even when she mistook them for Zarant Military.

"What do you want to know?" Diana wearily asked. Leaving and finding another home with a basement was out of the question. It would take them too long and she did not have the energy. And, after last night's harrowing storm, she wasn't willing to risk Jimmy's life in a home without a basement.

"Only the SunSafes and Zarant Military have access to fresh produce."

Fresh fruit became obsolete at around the time of the Great SunSafe Migration. Lack of rain and intense heat made growing anything impossible.

During the global climate crisis of 2026, erratic weather and a prolonged heatwave forced farmers to abandon their craft in droves. Those that remained were soon bankrupted by global governments' appropriation of their crops to feed starving populations. Food prices skyrocketed and poor people rioted in the streets. Gradually, their numbers shrunk as they died of various factors that stemmed from malnutrition and disease.

"We're not Zarant Military, nor do we have ties to any multinational. We're just like you, trying to survive."

Rose hesitated. The old woman was so believable. "With access to fresh fruit," Rose condescended.

Diana hobbled forward and lent herself the appearance of fragility. "Please put the gun down before you hurt Jimmy. I need him to get home." Rose hesitated before lowering the gun, though she kept it in her hand. "Thank you."

"Do not thank me, yet. I am still holding the gun, and I know how to use it to protect my family." Rose was a lioness protecting her cubs. "You said you need him to get you home. If you are not Zarant, then you must be SunSafe residents."

The razor-sharp edge to Rose's voice warned Diana that she didn't trust SunSafe residents any more than she trusted Zarant Military. A decision had to be made if they were going to get any rest. While she contemplated, Diana settled her eyes on the little one—Ronan's little tongue travelled over his lower lip, salivating, while his eyes remained glued to the crisp green orb in her hand.

Suddenly, Diana let out a deep, defeated breath and gave a capitulating nod. "Okay. Why not." Her eyes travelled over the kids once more, before they locked onto Rose's piercing brown eyes. "Well." The house gave an abrupt heave and Ronan wrapped his little arms around Rose's legs. Diana looked around. "We should get into the basement."

A grading sound jolted everyone. Marti moved closer to Rose.

Jimmy ran to the kitchen window and pulled off the aluminum foil Rose had placed over it. He couldn't see much beyond the darkness, but he saw enough to make the blood drain from his face. "Another sandstorm!"

Storms were hitting with much more frequency than Diana could have imagined before they'd left the Nest.

With the circumstances as they were, Rose had no choice but to get the kids into the basement. "Ronan, it will be alright. Let's get to the basement," Rose said, as she ushered Marti and Ronan ahead of her. The food pantry in the neighboring home hadn't inspired much confidence in Rose for waiting out a storm. "Marti, help Ronan down and light some candles while I help her down."

Once she'd tucked the gun into the back of her waistline, Rose went to help Diana down the stairs as hurriedly as possible with a woman Diana's age.

A tumultuous, crashing noise made them pause halfway down the stairs. Rattled, Diana waived a bit before Rose placed a hand around her waist and propped her up.

"You, up there! Get down here before you get injured by a flying object through the window!"

Marti, being the industrious thirteen-year-old that she was, took out candles and began to light them. Ronan moved onto Rose's lap as soon as she was settled.

Another loud, breaking noise shook the house.

“Oh my God! The car in the street! It’s—” Jimmy swallowed hard and remained hypnotized by the howling storm outside. Still at the window, his eyes grew wide from fear as he cried, “The car is flying! Oh! I think that’s a tornado!”

Rose couldn’t believe he was still upstairs. The basement door needed to be shut.

“If you don’t get down here right now, I’m going to shut this door and you’re going to be on your own!” Rose screamed at the top of her lungs.

The warning worked. Within seconds, Jimmy was strapped like a mule with Rose’s filled sacks as he clumsily stumbled down the stairs.

“Oh, wow!” An ugly sound—sandblasting, the kind that could grate a person’s skin off—pierced the night. Jimmy paused. Swallowed. Then he put the sacks next to Rose. “I couldn’t get the wagon.” Adrenaline began to leave his body and make room for fear.

There was suddenly nothing scary about Jimmy. Rose watched him through the flickering candlelight and saw the petrified boy inside of the man.

“Have storms become more frequent in the last twenty years?” Diana was disturbed by Rose’s comments about them occurring with more frequency. With the near halt of human activity, climate degradation should have stalled. Why would it have worsened? What was the driver?

Confused, Rose faced Diana. Diana’s question made Rose wonder where she could have been for the past twenty years.

“If you aren’t aware of the increased frequency of the storms, then you’re clearly not from the SunSafe.” The SunSafe got battered just as often, only its residents had the protection of the structure. Rose’s eyes lingered over the apple again, then travelled up to Diana’s face.

Fruits, vegetables, anything with roots that required sunlight and water to survive, even humans, withered and died in the exposed environments. The fruit in Diana’s hand made it difficult to lie about their origins to Rose. Tired of the game, Diana leaned over and reached for her own cloth bag. It sat on the floor, next to the blankets and comforters that served as her bed. Turned upside down, the ripe apples and tomatoes rolled out.

Rose, Marti, and Ronan all gasped.

“Where... Ronan, put that down.”

A sharp wind howled above. The candles flicked. Jimmy swallowed hard as Ronan moved closer into Rose.

“It is alright. He can have the apple,” Diana said, nodding her head towards Jimmy who had his own sack of fruits and nuts.

“But, where? I mean—” Rose felt dizzy with a sudden craving for the crisp apples on the floor. What was she missing? How could the strangers not be from the SF SunSafe, yet have fresh fruit? They had to be lying! It took every ounce of willpower to keep from reaching out, taking one of each, and biting in. “If you won’t leave, we’ll leave as soon as the storm passes,” Rose said, placing the gun on the floor, next to her thigh, for easy access.

Rose could not wrap her head around the possibility of an apple tree growing inside of a home or a basement. No. Impossible. They had to have access to resources, and the multinationals owned all of the resources, which meant, they were with the multinationals, in some capacity! Any fragment of association with the multinationals was enough for Rose to know they were in danger.

A thunderous clatter shook the home. The way the walls heaved and groaned; it sounded as though the roof had come off.

“No, Ronan!” Rose looked back just in time. “Put that down. Now.”

A pained look formed on Ronan’s face as he put the apple back. Diana noted his slumped shoulders and pouty little mouth as he did what he was told and went to sit by the girl the woman called Marti, who seemed equally dejected.

Diana had been about to protest the children’s right to have as much of the fruit as they wanted, but Rose cut her off.

Jimmy sat on the floor cross-legged, beside Diana.

“We don’t want to owe you anything.” Rose straightened her back and sat taller, trying to project more determination than she had. “I don’t know who you are, but you are clearly someone with access to a greenhouse and a stream of water, and electricity.” As Rose spoke, Jimmy began to wash his hands with sorrow for the children whose eyes were filled with want. “The only people I can think of that have access to these things are people associated with the multinationals.” Vehemently shaking her head, she added,

“Please put your fruit away and let’s just get through the day... and hopefully this storm. Then we will part ways. Unindebted to each other.”

Silence settled in as Jimmy collected the fruit and dropped it back into the bag. With each one, he mournfully glanced at the children, who were helping Rose lay some blankets on the floor to sleep on.

Diana watched the room in silence, then said, “We’re from an unknown, autonomous country in Central California. We call it Lazador.”

Rose stiffened. “I am not benighted, so excuse me if I do not swallow your fantastical stories about made up countries wholesale?” Rose was incredulous over the old woman’s audacity to lie right to her face. “Next, you’re going to tell me that you come from some parallel universe, or something ridiculous.” No longer willing to give Diana any more opportunities to lie, she said, “Enough. You clearly cannot be honest with me, so let’s just be done with conversation and part ways as soon as this storm passes.” Privately, Rose worried it wouldn’t be that easy to part ways. She worried they might receive some kind of reinforcement from Zarant Military.

“She’s not lying,” Jimmy jumped in, defensively.

Rose’s cold, sharp glare made him cower. “There is no such city. Not in California. And Zarant Military would destroy any autonomous community that rivaled the SunSafes.”

Suddenly, Rose found herself wondering whether they weren’t a couple of mentally disconnected people, living in some alternate reality. The stress and trauma of living a scavenger life had a cost. But then, what about the fruit? No. They had to have ties to Zarant, or one of the other multinationals. Nowhere else do the resources to grow real food exist. A shock of hatred shot through her, which she shook off. If the storm did not end soon, she would be stuck there until the sun went down.

“Zarant Military would try to destroy us if they knew we existed.” Diana saw Rose’s hand search for and rest on her gun, which was still on the floor beside her. “We have our own vertical gardens, our own power grid, and the children have classrooms with real books.”

Martina and Ronan stopped what they were doing and looked to Diana with wonderment in their eyes and said, “Momma, can we go there?”

Twelve

One Week Later.

Brightly lit rooms, with polished floors of blue-gray concrete and incredible oil-on-canvas portraits of nature on every wall, greeted Rose and the kids. Then there was the great hall. Lazador's great hall had living walls that housed garden beds lush with fresh thyme, oregano, and every other imaginable herb; Strawberries and other fruits were interspersed amongst the herbs. Every farm table had a metal bowl with nuts and dried fruit for residents to snack on. Two times a day, twelve thousand Lazador residents gathered in that space to take their breakfast and a late lunch.

Rose smiled when she saw Martina pulling Ronan by the hand across the great hall. Darting between tables and benches, they happily chased and played with other children.

"I don't understand," Gary said, walking beside Rose, his hands reiterating his frustration. "How were you all feeding millions of homeless people? And what about drinking water, where did that come from? Did you rely on purification tablets?"

Images of filthy containers collecting water during erratic storms entered Rose's thoughts. People had been so desperate for water that there were always fights for the little bit collected.

Rose closed her eyes to try and edge out disturbing memories from her mind. It did not work. "We never had anywhere near enough of anything. As you can imagine, water purification tablets and food became the most valuable commodities amongst the tent populations in the East Bay. They were so prized that many people died for them... and many, well... I'll just say they were desperate." The unimaginable things people did to themselves, and to their children, to survive—Rose wished in that moment that she had a

means to erase the memories. “Humans are cruel, you know. Selfish and cruel to each other.”

Rose’s words hung in the air for a moment. Gary knew exactly what she meant, and he felt sorry that she had to bear witness to it.

“Tell me about the early life of the tent cities.” Gary wanted to understand what happened to the redlined populations *after* he went underground.

By the time Lazador was ready to take on its residents, most Americans had abandoned their lives in small towns and moved to the bigger cities, where most of the jobs were. A few years later, those same populations migrated once more to try their luck at getting into a SunSafe city—the Great SunSafe Migration. But where were the government safety nets?

“At first, it was difficult... really difficult. As you know, we’ve been in a perpetual severe drought. The rain just wouldn’t come... and things got so desperate for so many that they began drinking their own urine. Of course, people got sick and many died of dehydration.”

“Did you ever get aid?”

Rose grimaced and said, “Somewhere along the line members of a startup donated three water filtration systems to the hospital. Now, everyone can turn their urine into safe drinking water, but if there is no water to begin with—”

“It’s pointless,” Gary said, connecting the dots.

“Right,” Rose whispered and shook her head. Then, she put her hands in her Lazador issued hemp pant pockets and reflected out loud, “How could I help? I could not. There were never enough resources and it was reflected in the people. They became thin and gaunt-eyed. Some became forgetful, others exhibited signs of resignation and severe depression. Suicides became a daily occurrence.”

In a way, Gary agreed with Diana. Capturing history for future generations was of paramount importance. With that, he couldn’t understand why she had been so persistent on doing it herself. Nor could he understand why she had willingly put Jimmy’s life in danger with hers. Diana’s actions crossed a line when she convinced Carl to neurochip her and Jimmy. But what could he do about it? Nothing. Not until she came home again. *If* she came home again.

Gary pushed his frustration aside and prayed that either Diana or Jimmy would connect their neurochip to the Nest. Of course, he understood why they had not. They didn't want to be found, or summoned back, but their actions had produced a lot of anxiety amongst their friends and loved ones. If only Diana would have shared more information with Rose about her plans.

Rose interrupted Gary's thoughts when she said, "About a month before I took Ronan and left the East Bay, the multinationals had been swapping out our food supply. Without notice, they took us from a green algae-based food to something completely inedible. Unrecognizable. It had been a blue-sky scorcher of a day. Miles and miles of homeless encampments surrounded our hospital and stretched into other cities. And I remember the protests and burning pyres to protest the shortages of food. People burned everything they could to draw the attention of the SF SunSafe residents. At some point, people began shooting at the SF SunSafe. And then, as if out of nowhere, trucks carrying uniformed Zarant Military guards recklessly drove through our tent cities, killing people and destroying homes. The Military had come, it seemed grudgingly, to deliver additional food rations. But whatever was in those jars was not food. At least, not food intended for human consumption. What they brought us were jars of foul-tasting, foul-smelling goo that you had to hold your breath to swallow." Rose shook her head and added, "Keeping the goo down was even harder than getting it down."

It was no secret that Zarant was experimenting with lab-engineered food, including meat cloning. "So, what *was* in the jars?"

Rose pursed her lips and shrugged. "No one knew, nor could anyone ever get an answer. I once heard about an investigative reporter who was looking into it... the spouse of a colleague, but she was transferred to some triage facility for the multinationals, and we lost touch. And that was that." Rose absentmindedly brushed a lock of black hair behind her left ear. "There were rumors... always rumors about the origins of what the multinationals were feeding us in those jars, but nothing was ever confirmed. And some of the rumors were so grotesque, I honestly didn't know if I wanted to know the truth." Rose fell silent and Gary could see that her mind was still wading through her memories, so he walked beside her in silent contemplation.

Gary heard every word Rose said, even though his focus remained on Diana and Jimmy. With their disappearance, the food jars lost their importance. If only Diana would have taken Edward with her. Why would she take Jimmy? Claudia said that the whole thing was his idea. Could he be searching for his mother? Gary prayed they both returned safely.

After a short moment of silence, Rose said, “The thing is that after a prolonged period of hunger, you’ll eat anything. After a couple of days of starvation and stomach cramps, the awful, detesting smell went away. The slimy texture was always a thing for me. I don’t think I could ever get past that slimy texture... or that God awful smell.” A slight shiver escaped her at the thought of a spoonful of the slimy goo sliding down her esophagus.

“Hi Rose... Dad,” Michelle greeted them as she walked towards them in her typical businesslike manner. “I am sorry for my tardiness. I was hoping to find that Diana and Jimmy had finally tethered to the Nest.” The resignation in Michelle’s voice was not a good sign.

Rose, Martina, and Ronan were discovered in Reedley, by Edward, when they followed Diana’s instructions and broke into the Pepto-pink house that Lazador still utilized as a greenhouse and triggered the alarm.

If there was one thing Rose could go back in time and change, she would change her behavior towards Diana and Jimmy. But there was absolutely no way that she could have known they had been telling the truth. Now, she worried that she would never get the chance to thank them. Rose knew well the life she’d come from—the scavenger life—and she knew that Diana and Jimmy were in over their heads.

Michelle and Edward pinged Jimmy’s and Diana’s neurochips several times a day, but they had yet to find them tethered.

“It’s all bad news,” Gary said, concern hardened the lines around his eyes. “All we can do is hope that we get lucky and they tether.”

“I am sorry. I wish I could have known. I—”

With an empathetic frown, Michelle placed her hand on Rose’s arm and said, “We’re not assigning blame. You couldn’t have known that she had people worried about her.”

Michelle would have pushed to have Claudia search for them in the East Bay, but after hearing how many of refugees there were, and that Zarant Military had been there wearing hazmat suits and may still be there, she decided against it.

Gary gave Michelle a nod then turned to Rose. He said, "Rose, please feel free to come see me if you think of anything more, I should know. Otherwise, we can pick up where we left off tomorrow. I will leave you in Michelle's capable hands."

Michelle gave him a warm peck on the cheek before he left. Rose felt her heart flutter from the warmth the moment produced. It had been a long time since she's experienced genuine love and quality of life around her. Until yesterday, her life had become a high-risk game of survival of the fittest.

"I'd like to show you the library," Michelle said, ready to lead the way when she saw Rose cast a glance in the direction of Marti and Ronan, who were busy eating herbed tomato toast at a table filled with children their age. "Do not worry. They will be fine." Michelle smiled warmly. "I'll make sure they know where you are."

Turning from the kids to Michelle, Rose nodded. She was not worried, she was happy. It was taking her every last effort to keep from crying tears of joy. Marti and Ronan looked like happy, carefree children. And, most importantly, they were safe, away from opportunist scavengers, the harmful sun and dangerous storms, and they had plenty of food and water.

If only Rose could let Jasmine and Igor know their son was safe.

"Rose? Are you okay?"

She had drifted. Rose blinked away the past and said, "Library? I would *love* to see it!" Diana had been right; the Nest was an absolute marvel! The vertical gardens were bigger than she could ever have imagined. There were still so many questions waiting on the tip of her tongue, but she wasn't yet comfortable enough to ask them.

The library was a breathtaking sight. Standalone shelves dissected the large room into sections that doubled as classrooms. Every wall doubled as a floor-to-ceiling, filled bookshelf. So many books! There were also easels and water color paste and hemp canvases waiting to be painted on. A poster showed what plants the paste's color had been derived from, and the formula. A series of long tables and benches served as desks. Each

“desk” was furnished with a hologram screen and etch-pad for math and writing problems.

“We’re in the process of digitizing every book you see. That way, they can benefit many generations.” Rose listened with bonified amazement that such a community could exist below ground.

Michelle walked ahead of Rose and ran a hand across a shelf of books. It was the way Michelle’s fingers so gently caressed the rib of each book that communicated her reverence for each one. Rose read the titles as she walked, a wide smile flourished on her lips. Two chairs and a small coffee table were tucked away in the corner, at the end of the bookshelf. Hundreds of small nails gridded a cork-panel that hung on the face of a bookshelf. Each nail held a thumb drive with a number on it. A registry just below linked the number to a name.

“What are these?” Rose asked, as she took the headset from the coffee table.

Michelle inserted a thumb drive and hit play. “Experiences from the past,” Michelle replied, and took a seat in a chair. Rose took the other. “Each one is a different recounting of a life before the collapse of life as we knew it. Our Nest’s collective past is here, on this wall for anyone who wants to remember, or learn about the past.” Behind the wall paneling was a microphone and another set of earphones.

Rose nodded, understanding why she had been brought to the library. “You’d like me to recount my experience.”

Michelle nodded. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“I would not. It would be my pleasure,” Rose said, turning the registry page. Every name on the pages was a stranger, yet she’d been welcomed so wholeheartedly as though she’d been one of them from the start.

Two Weeks Later.

Blisters oozing a white pus mixed with blood covered his body. The skin on his face and hands was a lobster-red, blotched with sun lesions. His lips, usually beaming with a bright naïve smile, were swollen, cracked, and split. Jimmy was disfigured and bloodied to a near unrecognizable state. Mercifully, the gauze they had wrapped around his eyes hid some of his malignant condition.

“His eyes are destroyed, as is the rest of him.” Dr. Rose Garcia insisted on treating Jimmy. It broke her heart that he looked nothing like the man she’d met at that abandoned home in Tracy, CA.

Nodding, Michelle bit her bottom lip and let the tears fall from her eyes. Jimmy barely survived the painful sensation of being baked alive, which made each rise and fall of his chest a miracle.

Feeling her sister’s pain, Claudia took Michelle’s hand in hers.

Anger and the feeling of helplessness sent Claudia to a dark place. She let her thoughts run wild and they took a deep dive into the recesses of her mind; they ran like a river snaking through a carved path, dredging up sediment that muddied the waters and turned dreams into nightmares. An image of Diana’s crippled hands clawing at hard dirt, from the depths of the darkness, was fabricated by her conscience. It came from a deep-rooted fear Claudia had, a fear that Diana had somehow fallen into some hole and couldn’t get out. Next, she imagined she could hear Diana’s voice pleading for help. There had to be a reason that Jimmy left Diana behind, but Jimmy couldn’t talk, and not knowing why he left her was torture.

Startled by the feel of a strange hand on her shoulder, Claudia closed her eyes to get a grip on herself and reel in her thoughts.

Michelle looked away, but Claudia saw the heartbreak on her sister’s face.

“How’s he doing?” There were dark crescents beneath Edward’s lower eyelids. He had not slept. None of them had.

Claudia wanted desperately to find comfort in his arms, but she couldn’t do that to her sister.

Edward held out a glass of water for Claudia, but she shook her head. “Michelle might need some. I was just leaving.” She gave Michelle a warm, sisterly hug, and left without acknowledging Edward. After Claudia left, a silent discomfort settled between Edward and Michelle.

Why couldn’t Edward see that Claudia wasn’t interested in him? Why couldn’t he see *her* standing before him, with her heart on her sleeve, wanting *him*. Michelle looked away from Edward and sighed her longing away.

Jimmy was being housed in isolation because of the third-degree sunburn all over his body.

"It's times like these that I really miss coffee," Michelle said, taking the glass of water from Edward. She gave it a whirl in the glass for something to do and watched the clear liquid swirl before taking a sip. It soothed the lump that was lodged in her throat. "They have him on a regimen of milk of the poppy, so I doubt he's feeling much." His swollen skin with open sores had been treated with herbal antiseptics. "They're in the process of wrapping him with coca leaves." She added, "That should really let him rest without pain."

Not trusting himself to speak, Edward nodded. The stubbled beard did little to hide his quivering lips. The deep pool of sadness that lapped back and forth in the depths of his brown eyes threatened to drown him. "Michelle," Edward mustered, before she spared him from having to ask.

"I... I want to lie to you and tell you that he is going to be alright, but I can't." Her eyes remained locked on Jimmy as the nurses busily worked on him. Her breath caught when Edward's stray breath tickled the loose hairs on her neck. "This," she swallowed, "this is the hardest, most cruel thing I've ever had to endure since moving to the Nest." In that moment her heart broke in two halves. One-half longed for Edward, a man who was in love with her sister, and the other half cursed the tragedy of Jimmy's life. A harsh and lonely life that would extinguish just as he found happiness.

Edward was just over her right shoulder, standing in the door's archway. A tightly pulled back auburn bun gave Michelle's big, dewy eyes prominence; their sorrowful warmth remained focused on the rise and fall of Jimmy's chest.

"What have...." Edward's voice broke and he quickly regrouped. "What's his prognosis?"

Jimmy was still a kid to Edward, one who had paid a big price in life. Abandoned by his father at birth, and then later by his drug-addicted mother in his early teens, Jimmy had to navigate and survive the streets as a homeless, unwanted child. It seemed so unfair that one person would suffer such a cruel life at every turn. And after all of that, to have it so cruelly snatched when the road before him was finally paved? What God would think that just?

Jimmy was being kept in a glass, quarantined room inside of Lazador's infirmary. His burned skin had been surgically removed and a nurse was in there with him, gently lifting his arms while another nurse worked on wrapping antibiotic laced coca leaves over the raw skin.

Leaning her head against the doorframe, Michelle closed her eyes. "He had to have been driving that motorcycle all day to get like that. I've tried imagining what would provoke him to be so... so..." She wanted to curse Jimmy because she was angry with him for doing this, but she couldn't. There had to have been a good reason for him doing what he did, and that reason had something to do with Diana. "... so careless." Where was Diana?

"I do not understand. Where did they go? Why? And where in the hell is Diana?"

Michelle thought she heard it, but still looked to Edward and saw that he in fact had begun to cry. After that, the dam broke and her own tears spilled freely.

Something changed and Edward's anguish etched deep canyons across his forehead. Visible remorse pulled downward at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"It's my fault—"

"Don't." Michelle did not let him finish. "You didn't know this would happen." Michelle guessed that Edward would blame himself, just as she had, and she was certain they weren't the only ones. Somehow, it had become commonplace to tease Jimmy whenever he did something quirky, which he always did.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he took a moment to try and recompose himself. There was too much hurt in his heart to gather himself, so he let himself feel the pain. Struggling to speak between sobs, he said, "He came to see me, but I was too busy. I had no idea that he and Diana were leaving the Nest."

Michelle shook her head. "You couldn't have known." She had to tell herself that *she* could not have known either.

A few days before Jimmy and Diana left the Nest, Jimmy had stopped by her office to see her. He seemed his usual nervous self and could not really get his words out. Though it had not been her intention to take out her frustration on Jimmy, she did. Annoyed with algorithm changes Clarence made on the Governing Computer without consulting her,

she snapped at Jimmy to hurry it up. After that, he'd become too nervous to speak, so he apologized and left.

Edward knew that Michelle was right; however, in that moment, it was difficult to accept. "What did Rose say?"

That was not a message Michelle wanted to relay. With pained hesitation, Michelle bit her bottom lip and said, "Edward...." her voice was a whisper. The prognosis was dire. "You should have your team come say their goodbyes."

It was as if his brain outright rejected the meaning of Michelle's words. Edward's thoughts sputtered to grasp the meaning. After a moment of disoriented confusion, he shook his head and said, "So there's no chance?"

"Not enough to give hope," Michelle sniffled.

Heartache took over and Edward wrapped his arms around Michelle, both to comfort her and himself. The tears flowed in silence until Edward released her.

On the inside, Michelle was a fumbling mess. She hid it well.

"What about his neurochip? Can we get anything from it?"

Sorrow cast its dark shadow on Michelle as she said, "After." That was all she could say before her voice broke and the tears returned.

"After," Edward whispered back as the same darkness reached into his heart. At a loss for words, Edward's eyes fell upon Jimmy and he sobbed.

After all the heartache he lived through, Jimmy had always remained resilient. Edward would miss that infectious laughter, and that bright gleam in those big blue eyes that always shined so bright. Jimmy had been a bright spot in a dark world—a bright spot, Edward lamented, that would soon go dark.

"Michelle," Claudia's voice rang from behind. "It is dad. He is asking about Jimmy."

Claudia did her best not to look in Jimmy's direction. She couldn't bear to see him as he was, deceptively peaceful while his heart worked overtime against the trauma of third-degree burns. It was too painful to witness his life as it left him because when he passed he would leave a gaping hole in her heart.

Claudia's long black hair was tied in a sloppy ponytail, a hairstyle Edward usually loved on her, because it showed how unaware she was of her natural beauty; however, Edward did not notice her hair just then. He noticed the deep well of sadness in her eyes,

and longed for nothing more than to hold her in his arms. He could console her, if she would just let him.

Thirteen

A promiscuous release of fetid odors trapped within the building's carpet fibers choked the air inside Building 801. Like the structures in the immediate vicinity, Building 801 was an unremarkable, squalid building, situated in the most indigent neighborhood of the SF SunSafe.

The instant Yesenia crossed the building threshold from the Skywalk to the lobby, the vulgar odor hit her like a punch in the gut. Why the sudden odor, when she'd only gone from one building to another? She looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Out of curiosity, she glanced back to the Skywalk she had emerged from. There, she found her explanation: strategically placed fans at the mouth of the Skywalk prevented the odorous air from wafting into the building she'd come from.

From smell alone, it became obvious that she had entered into an alarmingly poverty-stricken neighborhood. Admittedly, she hadn't been aware that such levels of beggary existed within the SF SunSafe. Everyone knew they were inevitable, but seventeen years after the Great SunSafe Migration seemed to be much too soon.

Nauseous from the potpourri of ripe body odor, Yesenia swallowed and contrived a breathing method to try and appease her gut. Unfortunately, the idea to elongate the interval between breaths had to be abandoned almost immediately because her lungs refused to cooperate. Within seconds they began to burn and demand fresh air, which then gave rise to a wave of panic within her.

Wanting to think about anything other than nausea, Yesenia focused on the swarm of children all around her. Most had holes in the knees of their pants and malnourishment seemed to know their bodies well. White spots on their cheeks, sunken eyes, and skeletal builds, all signs that they were not eating properly.

While she remained focused on the children, Yesenia inadvertently kicked a discarded food jar that lay in her path. The glass container went flying forward before crashing into a three-legged chair that sat turned on its side. The jar's contents splattered everywhere and the playing children simply went around the mess, unphased by it and their own derelict state.

Darting and weaving, the children ran and played, narrowly missing the zombie-like men and women who sat on the floor with lugubrious demeanors and downward cast eyes. The adults seemed extinguished by the wear of constant worry, just like the folks of Reedley, California, had been. Yesenia easily recalled the level of depravity her fellow Americans endured until they finally gave up and abandoned their homes for the cities.

Where was that odor coming from? Yesenia took in her surroundings and settled on the multitude of half-eaten food jars that littered the floors. That noxious odor was emitted by their food? Yesenia's stomach lurched.

It took a bit of doing, but Yesenia managed to govern her stomach as she navigated the maze of people, trash, and filthy furniture in her path. A girl of perhaps three, with adorable lopsided pigtails and big blue eyes, unexpectedly ploughed into her knees. Managing to hold onto her balance, Yesenia caught the little girl and quickly set her on her little bare feet. Giggling, the girl turned and ran off with her arms held out. She was an airplane.

Taking a moment to regroup, Yesenia went to the window and smiled upon an old San Francisco Victorian that sat all by itself, far below, outside of the SunSafe's walls. There were other dilapidated buildings around it, but that was the one that caught her eye. It looked lonely, yet determined to survive. She smiled, and without thinking, took a deep breath. Her stomach churned, and she swallowed. Gripping the railing that ran waist high along the wall, she focused on the Victorian and breathed through her mouth as she fought with her gut, until it relented and agreed to hold the contents a bit longer.

All she could do was hope that the air circulation worked properly in the basement mall.

Looking beyond the lobby, she saw the prodigious sign advertising the transition floor—certain floors of every building were called transition floors. Transition floors housed multiple shoulder to shoulder elevators, with direct access to the underground

mall. Relieved, she told her gut to hang tight as she ran across the Skywalk. The stairwell was significantly less crowded than the elevators; although, both options were extremely busy. However, twenty-two flights of stairs would require Yesenia to be in a confined space, bearing the nasal funk effused by her fellow unbathed residents, for a longer amount of time. On the other hand, the elevator would be much more cramped, but for a far shorter interval of time.

Without a second thought, Yesenia squeezed into the overcrowded elevator.

Struggling to keep her composure, and her lunch, Yesenia held her breath as people pressed against her. The descent was slow, cumbered by the continual addition and subtraction of bodies at every floor. Uncharacteristic claustrophobia began to set in. Meanwhile, her stomach gave a resounding remonstrance to warn she would soon lose all chance of keeping her lunch down.

As soon as the elevator doors opened to the basement, Yesenia pushed passed other exiting passengers and ran to the nearest trashcan. Unable to fight the nausea any longer, Yesenia bent over the overfull trash can, swung her shoulder-blade-length braid away from her face, and capitulated to her gut's threat of upheaval. Embarrassed, she wiped her mouth and walked away, taking solace when she saw that she hadn't been the first to puke there.

Finally, she took a deep breath of stale air and felt the relief in her gut. As she wiped the spittle off her lips, Yesenia marveled that no one bothered to check on her. Everyone walked past her, as though it were normal for someone to sick-up in a public trash can.

The rancid odor hadn't followed her down to the SunSafe's basement, the whole of which used to function as a mall.

Out of habit, Yesenia brought her thick French braid back, over her right shoulder. She first wore her braid that way as a self-defense mechanism; with time, the self-defense mechanism became a habit. The impetus had been a boy in her fourth-grade class who would take hold of her braids and yell, "Giddy up!"

Sweating, but feeling much better, Yesenia searched the thick crowd until she caught sight of Steven. He was on the opposite side of the stairwell with his back against the wall, engrossed by a woman's fight with a SalesPoint dispenser.

“Steven!” She called to her husband through the chaos and conversation around them, but he couldn’t hear her.

The SunSafe’s architectural concept for the underground malls had included resplendent shopping and dining options that should have employed many people, and served as a family pastime. During implementation, all of the retail stores were swapped out for SalesPoint machines, which were nothing more than large shoulder to shoulder vending machines. The multinationals thought it fiscally prudent to automate the entire mall, hence the vending machines.

SalesPoint machines were termed “efficient” because they allowed the multinationals to capture higher gains. Purchases only require an item code to be keyed into the keypad. Payments only require a fingerprint, a retina scan, and sufficient money in the bank for the purchase. Once the identity of the consumer is obtained, the purchase is automatically approved, and funds automatically transfer from one account to the other. After that, the purchased item falls into a receptacle. Period. No need to pay a human a wage. No need to worry about wage increases. SalesPoints require no sick time, health care, retirement account matching, and they eliminate the risk of hiring a bad employee. Simply, they are financially prudent and profitable.

“Hey, cutie,” Steven said, waving at his wife. He cut through the crowd and pecked her softly on the lips. “Coffee?”

There was no need to ask her twice. She eagerly nodded and followed him to an auto-café, wondering why he had picked such a destitute “community” to meet in. She also wondered why he had chosen to meet in the middle of the day when they always met after work?

“I’ll find us a seat.” She was looking at the overcrowded tables and noticed that the people looked a bit less glum than they had in the residential floors, but not by much.

Something important seemed to be on Steven’s mind. Yesenia caught the way he glanced at his watch, before accelerating his pace. He got into the coffee queue just ahead of a group of disorganized young adults; a good thing, since Steven seemed to be in a hurry. Loud and undecided, the group of younglings counted their combined change. Then, they graduated to an obnoxious negotiation over what drinks would yield them more pleasure. Unsurprisingly, they could not agree.

“Good hustle,” Yesenia quietly cheered her husband on. By the look and sound of them, the teenagers in line behind him might be a while before they settled on what to order.

A loud banging sound made Yesenia look across the way from Steven. The same woman Steven watched earlier was once again in a fight with a SalesPoint dispenser. Yesenia watched as the woman desperately kicked and swatted at the machine with her shoe. As if from nowhere, two Zarant Military guards appeared and flanked the woman. She did not shrink away or cower from them. She was a passenger in the car her anger was driving. Yesenia noticed that the woman’s left shoe, the one she’d used to swat at the machine, was now held by an angry guard.

One of the guards had arrived in an agitated state and became instantly aggressive with the woman, even manhandled her. His steely blue eyes sent a chilling shock down Yesenia’s spine. From where she stood, Yesenia could easily hear their voices rise, as if someone were slowly turning up the dial. But then it dawned on her that everyone around them had been the ones to quiet down. And then, without warning, the woman was shot with a nerve-neutralizer.

It took all of a split second for the woman’s body to paralyze and go limp.

“Bastards!” Yesenia whispered under her breath, wishing she could do something to help the poor woman. There had not been a justifiable reason to neutralize her. The woman was a fly when compared to the youth and strength of the two guards.

The icy blue-eyed military guard let the woman’s body fall hard to the floor as a collective whisper ensued around them. Combative, the military guards took on a menacing stance that seemed to dare the crowd to mob against them. Without further altercation, the woman was unceremoniously *dragged* away.

Once again, Yesenia noticed that no one dared to attempt to intervene. She also noticed that only a handful of others, other than herself and Steven, dared to look in that general direction. Most of the people there kept their heads hung, too afraid to get involved.

When a group of three adult men left their table, Yesenia moved quickly to take their spot.

“Hey! You left your trash behind!” Yesenia called after them, but they ignored her and kept walking. Afraid to leave the spot and lose it, she pushed the empty cups to the center of the table.

For the billionth time, Yesenia lamented the loss of community and civility amongst her fellow SunSafe residents.

“I’m depressed,” Yesenia said, when Steven placed two hard plastic coffee mugs on the table.

“Understandable,” Steven empathized. “It’s pretty rough on this side of town.” He was thinking that it wouldn’t be long until the conditions in this part of town spread to others, but he didn’t share his thoughts with his wife. He was fairly certain that she had already surmised the same.

The subtle signs of extreme poverty were already cropping up in their building’s Skywalks, lounges, and walkways. The multinationals must see it too. It would explain the announced transition from the more costly algae and laboratory engineered food, with actual texture and flavor, to the food jars with the mysterious contents. The transition to food jars was implemented in the buildings where the residents had run out of money. Buildings where the residents had become wholly reliant on the multinationals’ food stipends.

Immersed in his thoughts, Steven glanced nervously at his watch then brought the coffee to his lips.

“Ugh!” His face contorted. “This is awful!” He gave the dark liquid a sniff. “It’s certainly not coffee.” He had not known what to expect, since coffee sold in the SunSafe had long ago lost all vestiges of actual coffee, but he hadn’t expected something that smelled like sulfur and tasted of spoiled egg.

Yesenia tilted her cup back and forth as she stared into the dark liquid, mentally confronting a reality she’d been denying to herself for nearly a year: the time to leave the SF SunSafe had arrived. The once prosperous segment of the pre-SunSafe Migration America, a segment of people now relegated to the West Side of the SF SunSafe, had been bled dry of its wealth by the multinationals. *They*, the group which both she and Steven belonged to, were fast becoming today’s poor. She had to accept that life inside

of the SF SunSafe had been nothing more than a romantic notion, and respite from Marco, her ex-husband.

The future was bleak for West Side residents. Life in its current, daily deteriorating state was all West Side residents had left to look forward to.

Yesenia shuddered and stepped out of her thoughts with a deep breath and a sniff of the cup's contents. Rocking the liquid back and forth inside the cup, she admitted, "I'm afraid to taste it."

"You should be. It is noxious." Looking at the disengaged faces around the table, Steven lowered his voice and said, "Doesn't seem like these people are neurochipped. What do you think?"

The sight of neurochipped residents in the coffeehouse, where Steven had gone to meet Gary, had jarred him to his core. Zachary was too nefarious to be trusted with so much control over the people he technically ruled over. Steven knew that neurochips could be used for more than the mental escape gateway they were being marketed as. Like every bit of technology, he knew they could be hacked.

Perplexed, Yesenia quickly observed the sanguine expressions on every face and immediately wondered whether that was why Steven had chosen that building. At Zalt, the rumor mill had been running on about forcefully implanted neurochips on the poorest residents.

"If they are, would it explain how they can live in these conditions without protest." Concern seeped deeper into her soul as she appraised their surroundings with the new information in mind.

One of Steven's work colleagues had whispered details about something called the Pacification Method, several months back. The concept had left Steven feeling extremely uneasy. He had not shared that conversation with Yesenia, but it seemed the time had come.

"It can. If a person is pacified, they can live under any condition." Knowing his wife would require an explanation, he went into one. "It is truly awful. Pacification is a response from the body that occurs when the neurochip is programmed to override the brain. That instruction immediately blocks stress chemicals from being released to the body, while simultaneously directing the brain to stimulate the sympathetic nervous

system. When this happens, the neurochip arbitrarily activates the GABA receptors, calming the body and the brain, bringing them to a state of what we call ‘overdosed tranquility’.”

A man and woman happened to stop directly behind them to bicker. Apparently, she’d eaten more than her share of the food jars. She began to weep. Frustrated, the man with disheveled gray hair scratched behind his ear with annoyance. Just then, he happened to glance down at Steven, and realized they had an audience. Scoffing, he took his wife by the arm and marched away. As he stalked off, Steven noticed that the sole of the man’s left shoe had detached and flapped after him with every step he took. Also, the man had either lost a lot of weight, or he was wearing someone else’s clothes. Both his shirt and his pants were much too big on him and made him look like a twig in a sack.

“Maybe not... no. Maybe I am wrong. If pacification were at play, that couple would not be arguing.” He looked around again. “Maybe the people here are just demoralized.” Steven caught the glare from the man sitting next to Yesenia and smiled apologetically. The man harrumphed and turned his back to them.

Stealing another glance at his watch, Steven stood and said, “It’s time. Leave those.”

The directness in his cadence gave her pause, but she pushed the still full cups into the center of the table, with the others, and followed him.

“What’s going on?”

Moving with celerity, Steven masked his worry with a forced smile. “Trust me,” he said, slowing to pull up his left sleeve. Yesenia wondered what all of the writing on the underside of his arm was for, but he covered it back up and got them moving again before she could read the first word.

Placing one hesitant step before the other, she followed. Along the way, she gave him occasional sideways glances that he either ignored, or was too focused on his task to notice. Leading her up one long shopping walkway, and down another, they zigzagged through the underground mall until she had completely lost her sense of direction. Conferring with the writing on his arm, Steven paused and scratched his head. He seemed to be mumbling to himself as he looked back, retraced their last steps, then consulted his wrist once more before nodding.

“Okay. We are fine,” he said, moving again. They made a sharp left at the very next walkway, crossed two wide shopping lanes, and turned right. After crossing a few more walkways, he began searching for a specific door.

It never ceased to amaze Yesenia that every SalesPoint they walked past carried exactly the same merchandise as all of the others. Only necessities: toothbrushes, clothes, shoes, towels, and a few other pertinent items. A pervasive rumor persisted that there was a “privileged” mall somewhere in the SunSafe’s East Side, where the stores carried a variety of items, but Yesenia had never once seen any tangible proof. Then again, the rumor said only East Side residents were allowed entrance, which would explain why she had never seen it.

“Here,” Steven finally said, as he reached for a door handle. Although the secretive caller said it would be, he was still shocked to find that it actually was unlocked. If a Zarant Military guard, or any other multinational employee, found them in there they would likely be arrested.

“Here?” Yesenia said, looking around the door and seeing nothing on its face. All of the other doors had a number and a letter on them. Inside, row after row of shelves packed the room. “Steven—”

“Trust me,” he repeated, stooping down to see through the space between the racks, but he saw no human legs anywhere in sight. Standing to meet her worried gaze, he took her elbows in his hands and brought her close. “I received a message at work... it was anonymous.”

Worry carved canyons across her brow. “We should go.”

Holding her in place, he said, “We can’t. Whomever this was, they said it had to be the two of us... that it was very important... someone we know is in trouble.” He thought maybe Gary had come back looking for General Garret and got arrested. He had to make sure.

Alarm bells sounded off in Yesenia’s head. Why would anyone want to meet them in a Zarant merchandise storage room? It had to be Zarant Military police! It had to be a trap!

“Steven, we need to go!”

It had to be a trap. What if Zarant Military discovered that Steven helped Gary escape! How he managed it was still a mystery, but Steven guessed he got out through the ceiling. Their first instinct was to message Lazador's Nest with their questions, and that's exactly what they would have done, if they hadn't been prohibited from making contact with Lazador; the only exception being a dire circumstance.

They didn't yet know whether they were in a dire circumstance.

"Hello," an unfamiliar voice spoke, paralyzing Yesenia with fear.

It was a deep voice that came from an unlikely source: Fred stood at average height, had a soft frame and a twinkle in his eyes. Steven had expected it to be some military muscle head.

Fred had kept himself hidden in the first aisle, out of view until he was certain they were the same people he saw in the database. His life depended on his vigilance.

"Who... who are you?"

The man was a nice-looking gentleman. His kind physiognomy contrasted sharply with his Zarant guard uniform. The uniform was the same kind worn by the guards charged with patrolling the external grounds of the physical SunSafe city.

"I'm no one, only a man with a conscience." His glossy black eyes and full head of grayed hair reminded Yesenia of her own father. "I'm sorry about the obstacle course I sent you through." Fred had warned Steven to follow his directions exactly, even though they made Steven and Yesenia double back a few times. "I needed to be sure you weren't followed."

Steven knew there were no facial recognition cameras, or cameras for that matter, in this part of town. "You said it pertained to someone we know... someone you have in custody, and that their life depended on us getting here without being followed." He felt Yesenia stiffen at his side. "We have done as you asked. It is your turn to reciprocate." Steven hadn't mentioned anything about someone they knew being in custody to Yesenia. He hadn't wanted her to worry over something that he hoped was a mistake.

"We found a friend of yours; at least, she says she's your friend... she certainly knew enough about you." Fred, who hadn't yet—and wouldn't—share his name with them, could see that they had no idea who he could be talking about. "Do you not have a friend who has been missing?"

“Sir,” Yesenia said, somewhat curtly. His comment had touched a nerve. “We have many friends who have gone missing.” Zarant had arrested many of their friends and made them disappear. Forever. Her face hardened at the sight of the Zarant Military logo over his left breast.

“Touché.” Fred could feel Steven’s eyes on him. Judging him. He did not care. He knew he worked for a corrupt, evil organization, but he was not responsible for the hundreds of thousands of people who had been removed from the SunSafe. At least, not directly. Unlike most of his co-workers, he had a conscience. Diana was only one of many that kept him up at night. She was one he could, and would, help. “She says her name is Diana.”

“Diana?!” Yesenia’s head shot left and she locked eyes with Steven. “It cannot be... it has to be someone else. I only know one Diana and—”

“—an old woman of Brazilian heritage?” He saw Yesenia’s eyes fill with recognition, but she didn’t speak. She could not. She seemed to be at a loss for words. “She suffers from osteoporosis, especially in her hands and her back.” The confirmation was clear in both Steven and Yesenia’s eyes. Both were nodding.

“Please tell me, is she okay?” Yesenia barely got the fear out of her voice. Her mind had latched onto the worst-case scenario, and it wouldn’t let go.

Steven wrapped the whole of his wingspan around his wife and kissed her ear. “We’ll do everything we can to get her back.”

Yesenia wanted to believe Steven when he said they would get her back, but reality wouldn’t let her. Yesenia trembled in his arms, trying not to focus on the fact that *no one* had ever come back after having been taken into Zarant custody.

“Look, I can’t do much for her. All I can do is tell you that she’ll be deposited,” abandoned was the correct word, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it, “in Los Banos, with the others.”

“Los Banos?!” The cruelty of what she just heard made her nearly shriek her words. “Why? She is just a harmless old lady. Couldn’t we just get her back?” Yesenia was worried over how long Diana could live under the conditions she was being kept in. The fact that the man didn’t elaborate, or try to reassure her that Diana was okay, made her fear the worst. “Please... she’s just a sweet old lady—”

“—who was abandoned by her family outside of the SunSafe. Listen, if you can tell me who they are, I can arrange for them to claim her.” He would release Diana to her relatives, but only after he reprimanded them for their cruelty. “But they must be blood relatives. Otherwise, they won’t release her, and she’ll be sent off with the others.”

“She has no family,” Steven cut in before Yesenia could speak. “She wasn’t abandoned, she walked out herself.” Roberto had once shared with Steven the details of elderly abandonment. Families who had become unable to care for their older parents were putting them out of the SunSafe for the sun to take. It made sense that he thought she had been abandoned. The question was, what was she doing outside of the SunSafe at all? “We can care for her.”

Fred gave a regretful shake of the head and said, “I’m sorry, if I could, I would hand her over to you. She does not deserve to suffer as she has.” A knife pierced his heart when he heard Yesenia’s breath catch. Steven took her hand and squeezed it to calm her. Fred continued, his voice enunciated his regret, “But the law states that only a blood relative of an abandoned elder can collect them. I can assure you that the gatekeeper of that department will not release her to you, no matter how much I beg. But he might have me arrested if he found out I told you about her in the first place. So, you see, this is as far as I can get involved.”

Frustration simmered beneath Steven’s calm demeanor as he said, “Look, we *are* her family... in a matter of speaking.”

Again, Fred gave him a regretful shake of the head. “I am sorry. This was clearly a mistake.”

Fred had come to reprimand Diana’s family and to force them to take her back. Unfortunately, he believed Steven when he said that Diana had no family. Now, there was nothing he could do for her, especially not now that she’d been logged into the system. It would jeopardize his own family, and he couldn’t risk that.

Fourteen

October 20, 2045.

The hologram of a young, handsome, bright-eyed newscaster floated above the hologram table. His bushy, golden hair, styled and secured with generous amounts of product, framed his square jaw just right. His two-toned blue plaid suit was tailored to his chiseled frame, and behind him, adding depth and substance to his image, stood the brightly lit White House that had gone Dark years ago.

Government power was now centered inside of the One Building of the SF SunSafe.

Sara, the triage center's on-staff physician, was absorbed by the image of the enigmatic young man. Slimy was too clean of a description for him, with his disingenuous smile and smug face. He was the newest Zarant Media puppet. She wondered whether the last one was still alive. Like the protestors, they always seemed to disappear.

"Effective immediately, all people awaiting their turn to enter *any* SunSafe are banned from venturing into the Bay Area." His affected cadence annoyed Sara. Then, reading from a handheld device, he added, "You are to report yourself, the number of people in your family, and the number of people that remain in your community to the local Zarant Military chapter. Please call the number on the bottom of the screen." Pausing to clear his throat, he added, "This will help facilitate an efficient distribution of our national disaster relief resources."

What national disaster relief resources? As far as she could see, they had none. Dr. Sara Saenz paused the feed and stood with her arms crossed. What were they up to? Why were they isolating the East Bay, the *entire* Bay Area? She found it odd that they didn't bother to be specific.

She could send a message to her old friend, Dr. Rose Garcia. Theoretically, she should still be working in the Oakland Hospital, but she hadn't responded to any of her last messages.

"If you are in the Bay Area and you don't belong there, you will be arrested and held for an indeterminant amount of time." The news anchor's teeth were as white as the White House in the backdrop stock photo.

"Can they do that?" Dr. Jon Williams asked, as he walked over and stood beside her. "I mean, how many tens of thousands of people are in those refugee camps? They are from all over the country. They can't arrest them all, can they?"

Jon was Sara's adjunct, congenial protégé. Young and somewhat handsome, he believed he was going to save the world. All qualities that reminded Sara of herself, back when she had first graduated from medical school.

Dr. Sara Saenz imagined that since Zarant Industries, and the remaining four multinationals, had supplanted the U.S. Government in wealth and power, they could do whatever they pleased. As far as she was aware, no other collective entity, including the American people, had been able, or willing, to stop them from doing anything including redlining average and poor Americans from the SunSafes.

Turning to Jon, Sara found herself admiring his smooth, ebony skin; it had that youthful glow. He also had those idealistic bright eyes, but they were beginning to dim. The sadness suddenly came over her, like a creeping fog. Around his eyes, she could see vestiges of the hardness that had begun to root inside of him. It had to happen. It happened to her. She only wished it were not so soon.

The hardening of the heart was the only way to survive the triage center. Buffering one's heart against the cruelty of what they saw in their ward was an absolute necessity. Sara knew that, like herself, Jon's heart had to grow hard, or he would go mad.

"That is not a real public service announcement. It is a warning... maybe even a threat." Scrutinizing his eyes for a sign that she had gone too far, she continued with caution. "No one outside of the SunSafes is going to see it."

"Why not?"

Sara closed her eyes and tried to recall life outside of the SunSafe. It had been pure misery for everyone. "Jon... the people out there, they don't have televisions." Scoffing,

she added, “I would be surprised if they had electricity. I mean, who would provide a utility service for free? Certainly not our beloved multinationals.”

His expression said that he hadn’t considered that.

She clarified, “For all intents and purposes, the USA, outside of the SunSafe communities, is defunct.” Under duress, she wouldn’t be able to say how intact it was inside of the SunSafes, either. But that was neither here nor there.

“You’re saying—”

“That they just gave themselves the green light to arrest and make anyone out there disappear.” She rubbed her hands over her face and exhaled a bit of her exhaustion away, wondering why Zarant even bothered with the charade.

“So, the people out there, they’re just... what?”

She shook her head slowly, recalling that his parents were still out there. Jon had only gotten into the SunSafe because he was a doctor. “Your parents are bright people. They saw the writing on the wall early on. Most SunSafes were carved into existing cities with existing high-rise buildings, requiring less new construction. From the start, the capacity had not been there to house everyone, nor would it ever be.”

Emptiness spilled into Jon before he could shake the feeling away. He knew that Sara had worked in Oakland’s only remaining hospital until a couple of years ago; she had *lived* the severity of the conditions beyond the SF SunSafe.

Once again, Sara’s thoughts moved to her old colleague and friend, Dr. Rose Garcia. She made a mental note to reach out again. It hurt nothing to try. They used to keep in touch using a message box from the hospital. She wondered why Rose stopped checking it.

“There are no jobs in the SunSafes. Resources are thinning. There’s barely anymore housing. And the wealthier population is already beginning to resent us. Perhaps this is their way of reducing our numbers.” With that comment, Jon let Sara see that he understood more than he let on.

Jon made a good point.

Transport booths allowed people to move between SunSafes. They had been introduced into the SunSafes over five years ago, and had been a godsend for many

residents whose families had been scattered across multiple SunSafes. She wondered if it wasn't time to visit the Seattle SunSafe and see for herself how others were faring.

Walking to the glass wall, she looked at the room below their perch. Humanoid nurses called NRS2s, whose existence raised Dr. Saenz's hackles, moved amongst the patients below. The robotic nurses were so human in appearance that patients never suspected they were being treated by a machine.

"It's bewildering to me that we're even here as a country. Thirty years ago, you only saw medical centers like these in refugee camps, not in countries like the United States of America. People would not stand for it. But," spreading her arms as if presenting a gift, she said, "here we are, after the collapse of the global economy and the global food basket."

Sara lived through the tipping point that changed humanity's way of life forever. Consequently, she had been forced to move into the SunSafe. The way she saw it, automation was the impetus of the gradual bifurcation of the economic spectrum into two clearly distinctive prongs: wealthy (3% of the population) and not (the other 97%). Global Warming made the income disparity problem more acute. Poorer nations, whose food and water supply were destroyed by erratic weather, were abandoned by their people. This created an unprecedented refugee crisis with no solution.

Countries that used to take in refugees could no longer do so. Their own people were flailing in a sea of unemployment with no horizon in sight. First, the most basic jobs were automated: cashiers became self-checkout lines; autonomous cars displaced taxicab, rideshare, and long-haul drivers. Soon after, artificially intelligent robots that looked like machines took the jobs of humans, like maître d', food prep, risk analysts, actuaries, accountants, legal analysts, etc. Their creators were careful not to humanize the robots too much to keep the pushback to a minimum.

For some years, Sara had been optimistic that government would rollout some form of Base Minimum Income to alleviate the sting of poverty. But they never did. Now she realized they could not. The funds were not there. A jobless population cannot be taxed, just like you can't draw blood from a rock. And the tax dodging multinationals were not going to tax themselves.

“It surprises me that there is not an uproar out there. Why aren’t there protestors outside of the SunSafe?”

Sara wished she could take him to the East Bay, to cities like Emeryville, Oakland, or Alameda. “They are out there; we just do not know about them. It’s against Zarant’s interest to have its media arm publicize them. They like to keep us in our little bubble.” She touched her forehead against the glass pane. “My husband worked for the last independent media firm out there. Of course, that was before Zachary orchestrated their hostile takeover and dismantled them. So now, there is no such thing as independent reporting. The news gets distilled before being disseminated to the American people... or, should I say, the SunSafe people. It’s as if we’re supposed to believe that all of those people out there, the ones still waiting for their lottery numbers to be called, are doing so patiently, even though they are starving and dying.”

She had been working in Oakland when the whole North Bay seemed to be on fire. Burning tire pyres were aflame in nearly every intersection and their thick smoke darkened the sky. She wondered what it had looked like from this side. Had anyone even noticed?

Jon leaned towards her and tapped her with his elbow. “I wouldn’t go so far as to equate being admitted to the SunSafe to winning the lottery.” He smirked and dug something out of his pocket. “You should give your husband this.”

He stepped back and went to his desk, where he keyed a command into the virtual keyboard, causing the hologram of the newscast to dissolve.

Staring straight ahead, Sara lamented, “My husband disappeared after a protest against the multinationals.” She paused, then added, “A lot of journalists disappeared that day.”

Jon felt like a heel. How could he forget?! The day Sara’s husband disappeared had been a bloody day. A building on the western side had been destroyed by fire and all the residents perished. A fire rumored to have been set by Zarant Military to permanently excise the rebels from the population.

Jon pressed play and a hologram of a woman who had been admitted to triage that morning materialized on the table and drew their attention. She was young, had dirty blond hair, and was heinously sunburned.

“Please, please help us,” the woman pleaded with the NRS2 as it worked on bandaging her eyes, completely unaware that her nurse was an artificially intelligent droid built to look and act like a human. “We no longer have food or access to water and our highways have been blocked with barricades. We have been abandoned... left to die.” Blood tears streaked her cheeks. The NRS2 kept bandaging.

Jon paused the feed and wiped the tears from his eyes. “She rode a motorcycle overnight, all the way from southern San Diego. They didn’t let her into the LA SunSafe, so she came here. She spent two hours exposed to the morning sun. I do not think she’ll live, and neither does the NRS2.”

“Bastards!” Sara was talking to herself again, and Jon was familiar enough with her to recognize it. “I bet there are millions of dead people strewn about desolate cities across the country... maybe even the world.” She did not want to ever find out if she was right. She hoped she was not.

Jon was at the edge of their perch, standing beside her, looking down to the floor below. “I hope not, but it would explain why they don’t allow us to leave the SunSafe anymore.” His hands were at his waist, pushing his lab coat away from his slim waist. Everyone on the triage floor came from a town whose number had no prayer of being called. No one needed to tell him that the SunSafe lottery was a total farce.

“They come from some of the poorest communities out there.” When they stopped coming and the triage center was closed, what would Zarant do with doctors like Jon and herself? Sara decided it couldn’t be worse than the suffering of her patients and pushed the thought away.

“Exactly.”

Filled with the feeling of helplessness, Sara walked around the hologram table displaying a hologram of the floor below their perch, and watched as the patients were treated by NRS2s. Some applied a salve over the patients’ burns before they bandaged them. Some wrapped gauze around eyes to protect burnt corneas. Meanwhile, others took blood samples, distributed medication, or simply comforted dying patients. Sara suspected patients were kept alive long enough to be questioned.

A conversation Sara had with her husband the night before the last protest he covered came to her.

“Sara, Zarant has begun an aggressive campaign to eradicate all peoples living outside of the SunSafe, outside of Zachary’s control.”

“Now how can you possibly know that?”

During this time, Dr. Sara Saenz had still been assigned to the Oakland City Hospital where the homeless population had just exploded. As a witness to the rivers of homeless that streamed into the city, she questioned his theory. If it were true, she imagined Zarant Military would have started with the East Bay?

“Those questionnaires...,” he’d warned, “...the one’s you’re required to fill out for the new arrivals. Zarant Military Special Operations is using them to identify external communities of survivors in order to locate and exterminate them.”

Back then, Sara had no way of knowing that her husband’s instincts had been correct.

“You know, this warehouse used to be a huge technology store called Tech Buy,” she said to Jon, who had been lost in his own thoughts. “The big-box stores replaced the mom-and-pop stores, and then *they* were replaced by the online market, which was later absorbed by the Zarant umbrella.” Pausing to look around once more, she added, “I used to shop here, when this was a store. At the entrance there would always be a security guard. And, I think over there, on the right, that whole area was where the flat screens were.”

“Flat screens?” Jon asked, wanting to laugh at the outdated technology.

Sara played along. “Yes, that’s what we dinosaurs watched television on, before the hologram existed.” Fond memories of the old store came forth as she said, “Hard to believe this place is now a triage center and no lives are actually saved here.”

Jon knew that what they did there was a farce. They were forbidden from talking about any of it with fellow SunSafe residents. In their triage center, no one was actually treated for their illness. Although he couldn’t be certain, Jon suspected the triage center served as a makeshift AI learning center for the NRS2s. Sara had also said as much.

“Dr. Saenz, please come to Isolation zero-four-two-six. Dr. Saenz, please come to Isolation zero-four-two-six.”

She went to the hologram table and called up Isolation zero-four-two-six, and the hologram of a bedridden man appeared before her. "I'm being paged... to Isolation?"

"Isolation?" Jon repeated, as he peered over her shoulder. "They must have found something. Dr. Saenz, can I shadow you?"

Sara tilted her head to the right with curiosity, and said, "You knew we had someone in Isolation?" The Isolation rooms were rarely in use anymore, since most people who arrived to their triage center were treated by NRS2s, and not by her or Dr. Jon Williams, the only two humans on staff.

"All I know is that the patient didn't come in because of sun exposure."

Sara frowned, surprised. If he wasn't suffering from sun exposure, then he had to have come from the SF SunSafe.

"Is he East Side or West Side? And why wasn't he taken to the SunSafe hospital?"

SF SunSafe residents were not permitted to be treated at the triage center.

Jon pursed his lips and shook his head. "No. I do not think he's from the SunSafe...any SunSafe. He's not neurochipped, and his ID says he came from Yreka."

Sara stopped walking and her eyes narrowed. "Yreka?" How could he travel the distance from Yreka to the SF SunSafe and have no sun exposure? It was not unheard of, but only few had achieved it.

"I was waiting on preliminaries to loop you in. When the first NRS2 took his blood, it registered as normal. So, I sent in another sample and it had the same result. They must have found something if they issued a contamination warning and isolated him."

The humanoid NRS2s repulsed Dr. Sara Saenz. They were too human-like for her comfort. Of course, she never shared that feeling with Dr. Jon Williams, who seemed to be unphased by them. Sometimes, to Sara's dismay, Jon seemed outwardly fascinated when a new NRS2 model arrived with a new trait or behavioral feature.

If what Jon said was true, and she had no reason to doubt him, then she had to physically inspect the patient. As she walked towards Isolation, Sara realized that her blood was pumping full with adrenaline. She had not physically touched a patient in close to four years, which was the last time a patient was beyond a NRS2's abilities.

Without realizing it, her pace quickened, forcing Jon to skip every other step just to keep up. When they arrived, she relaxed herself and observed the patient lying in bed, inside of a glass box.

“What do you think?” Jon asked, as he came and stood next to her.

“I thought I saw a blue tinge to him,” she said, thinking of the hologram image she saw in their office loft. “And there it is.”

Sara’s eyes travelled to the man’s matchstick fingers, an indicator of lung disease.

“I am going to suit up and go in there. Want to join me?”

Jon’s eyes widened with excitement. “Really?”

“Yes. But it is not a game. It is a learning opportunity.” She shook her head, smiled, and led them to the quarantine room. A NRS2 followed close by, listening to the conversation, and learning from it. “This way, if we see this again, we’ll know what it is.”

“If we diagnose this successfully, we will never see this again. NRS2s will take us out of the equation. Right, NRS2?”

“Correct, Dr. Williams. We are here to learn and assist.”

Sara shook her head and corrected the machine. “No, you are here to learn and replace.”

NRS2 gave a confused look that made Sara’s skin crawl.

“So, now they can look confused?”

“The new ones can show pain,” Jon whispered back.

“That’s great,” she said, oozing sarcasm. “Grab a recorder so we can study the images from the perch.”

“Dr. Saenz, I record everything and keep it for seventy-two hours,” the trailing NRS2 informed them. And as usual, Sara ignored it.

It took them a few minutes to get into their hazmat suits and finally enter the room. Sara quickly walked over and pulled all the window covers closed. As she read the patient’s medical history, she noticed that Jon wasn’t exactly comfortable in his hazmat.

“Everything okay?”

“Um. Yeah,” Jon blushed. He felt clumsy.

When she opened the bag that held the man's personal contents, an old-fashioned driver's license fell out. Sara plucked it off the bed and saw that the name and address matched what the hologram displayed just above the patient's head.

"Yreka, California," she said, as her eyes bounced between the man's blue face, his driver's license, and the descriptive holographic sheet. "Forty-two." Scrolling down on the hologram, she added, "He seems really fit."

"I also noticed that this morning."

Sara pried open his eyelids and checked his pupils. "Delayed response," she said, as she moved the penlight from left to right. Her brow furrowed into a frown. "Was he administered something?"

They both looked to the NRS2.

"No drugs administered, Dr. Saenz."

"I need to see his lungs."

"Yes, Dr. Saenz," the obedient machine replied as it walked over and placed a hand over the man's chest cavity. Seconds later, his X-ray was projected as a 3D hologram above the patient.

"Lungs appear to be healthy," Sara said, encouraging Jon to arrive to his own conclusion.

"The tissue appears healthy," he agreed.

"He's blue and he has matchstick fingers, and yet his lungs are healthy." She knew NRS2 had already run through the same preliminaries, but she wanted to run through them with Jon.

"Sir." Sara looked at the screen for the patient's name. "Calvin? Can you hear me?"

The man's eyes opened as his body began convulsing. Reflexively, he brought his hands up to his neck as if he couldn't breathe, but before anyone could do anything, he flatlined.

After failing to revive him, Sara had no choice but to call the time of death.

"Jon, make sure to keep the camera recording."

NRS2 stepped forward again and said, "Dr. Saenz, I record everything and keep it for seventy-two hours."

“That is great, NRS2. You get a sticker.” NRS2 had an expression of having been wounded, but Sara ignored it and continued on. “Jon, please come closer and follow me as I speak. NRS2, back up so that Dr. Williams can do his job.”

“Yes, Dr. Saenz,” NRS2 replied and backed away.

Jon moved in closer to the patient, trying not to look at the man’s face who seemed to be only a few years younger than his father. Following Sara’s lead, he kept the camera a few inches back from the man’s body and recorded every inch of it.

With the help of the NRS2, Sara undressed the corpse. Next, she turned the head from side to side, then she examined the arms. Finally, she scoured the man’s body for lesions or possible signs of something that could give them a lead. She saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“Is that it?”

It was all Sarah could do with the tools they had at their disposal.

“Now we request the autopsy, checkout the organs and stomach contents, then we revisit the video to see if we missed something. After that, we are out of luck.” She realized that Jon had been hoping for more. So had she. “Place the camera on the tripod and connect it to the server, that way we can download the video from our perch,” she whispered. “Otherwise, once it leaves the room, NRS2 will want to run it through corporate before we can have access to the feed. That can take weeks.”

Jon nodded and Sara left him to it and left the room to get back to the perch.

After he placed the camera on the tripod, he couldn’t recall if Sara had wanted it left recording or not. Just to be safe, he left it recording with the lens focused on the deceased patient.

Later that day, as Jon supervised a NRS2 performing a skin graph on a fresh corpse, Sara stared at the live feed of Calvin and pondered what had infected him. There was also the question of how he managed to get from Yreka to San Francisco in his condition, without any sun exposure.

“Wait. What was that?”

Jon looked away from the skin graft hologram on his desktop to look at Sara. He was confused. “What was what? It is a run of the mill skin graft.”

“No, no. Mute your mic to the surgery. Look!” Sara rewound the video feed. “This must have happened after we left him. Look!” A thing that looked like a stainless-steel worm came out of the man’s nose, made its way onto the pillow and appeared to curl itself into a silver ball. Her eyes travelled to Jon who seemed as perplexed as she was.

“What in the hell?” Jon’s language surprised Sara, but it was understandable given what she’d just shown him. Curiosity in overdrive, Jon walked away from his surgery and over to Sara’s desk. “Can you rewind that again?”

They watched it multiple times, debating what they had just witnessed. Whatever it was, it wasn’t a disease that killed that man. Some kind of technology killed him.

“When is the autopsy taking place?” Sara said, enlarging the image on the hologram table, trying to get a better look at what had crawled out of the patient’s nose.

“There’ll be no autopsy.” Confusion registered on Sara’s face, which made Jon explain. “I am sorry. I thought you had been informed of the change. The body is still there because Zarant Military is coming for it.” Jon went to his desk and flipped through the digital communications he had received. “Here it is. I received the directive that says you and I are no longer allowed into that room.” It seemed odd that Sara hadn’t received the same communication, but given Sara’s annoyed reaction to the holographic document, Jon saw that she wasn’t surprised. “However, they need a warrant, don’t they? That should give us some time.”

Sara scoffed and said, “Warrants are only a formality. Either way, they already got one, from Senator Duarte herself.” Sara pointed to Senator Duarte’s signature on the document. “I must admit that I am surprised that the issue has already been elevated to the highest levels.” What she meant by that was that Zachary had been looped into the situation that concerned an unknown, non-SF SunSafe resident. Now they had gone and piqued her curiosity. “Shoot! I need to know what is going on in Yreka!” Pacing back and forth, she said, “I have a friend who has a friend.” Giving Jon a dangerous look, she said, “I’ll need you to cover for me.”

Jon thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No. You are lead supervisor. Your absence is a red flag. Who is your friend? I’ll go with them and have a look around, record what I find, and hologram you in while I’m there. Deal?” Jon wondered what he was

getting himself into. Leaving the SunSafe was forbidden, but it was also a way to see for himself what their patients were fleeing from.

Sara didn't like the idea of putting such a nice, naïve young man in danger, but he was right. Even if she called in sick, a military guard would be at her door checking on her. With her access, they kept her on a tight leash.

"Deal. I will send the contact message."

An unexpected visitor seemingly fell out of thin air. When Yesenia screamed, Steven ran out of their bedroom with soap suds still coating his beard. A homemade razor was in his right hand, which he held out as an awkward weapon.

"Steven!"

"Yesenia, what is it?"

"Look!" A metal ball with bulging eyes was rolling around on their living room floor.

"What is that? Where did it come from?"

"I do not know! It just appeared to fall out of thin air!"

Stepping in front of Yesenia, Steven held the razor out, hoping his courage wouldn't fail him. "Are those eyes?"

Moments later, a black rectangle the size of a door opened up a few paces behind the bug-eyed ball and a foot stepped out. The rest of the body followed.

"Sorry to scare you like this." Claudia stepped out of the Transport portal. It wasn't kind to frighten people the way she had just frightened Steven and Yesenia, but it had been unavoidable. She needed to talk to them about Jimmy and Diana in person.

How had Claudia done that? Was it really her, or was it some kind of hologram? How was it possible that she had materialized out of thin air?! Yesenia had so many questions that she managed to tongue-tie herself.

"Claudia?" Yesenia finally managed as she stepped around Steven. When she confirmed Claudia was there in the flesh, she wrapped her arms around the young woman. "Oh! It is really you! But—"

"—how! How did you... right in our living room?" Steven asked, still disbelieving his eyes. Then he recalled the way Gary disappeared from the café's bathroom. Steven kept telling himself that Gary had somehow raised himself into the ceiling tiles, but it wouldn't

square in his mind because the ceiling sat too high to reach, even if he'd stood on the toilet.

Wearing a sheepish expression, Claudia plunged her hands into her jumpsuit pockets and gave them an innocent bat of the eyes. "My dad placed a GPS tracker in your jumpsuit pocket at the coffeehouse. After that, Eyes over there—the Weeble remained on the floor—visually mapped out the room for me to open the portable Transport portal."

Yesenia gave Weeble a sideways glance before she moved to the coat rack, next to the door, where Steven's lab coat hung. She walked over and fished in the pockets until she felt the hard, round object stuck to the inside of the pocket.

Shocked, Steven wracked his brain, trying to pinpoint when Gary would have dropped that GPS tracker in his pocket.

"Is that... is it a new travel mechanism?" Yesenia asked, unable to just accept what her eyes and ears saw and heard. It seemed so fantastical to be able to travel so seamlessly, without the need of a fixed Transport booth.

Smiling, Claudia held up a handheld device that looked just like an old-fashioned cellphone. "This little device here, it circumvents our need for a Transport booth. With this, we can Transport ourselves anywhere, as long as the arrival destination is unobstructed. You never want to Transport into an existing object." Shivering, she added, "I've been warned a thousand times that it's a very painful way to die." The image of the frog half-materialized into a concrete block surmised it well. That had to hurt.

"That is genius technology!" Yesenia said. She was quite astonished. "Can we—"

"You are not allowed one. We can't risk the technology falling into Zarant Military's hands, which means a Transport wand cannot be kept inside the SF SunSafe. Yesenia wanted to tell her that she wanted to go back to Lazador's Nest, but she was afraid she would be rejected for having freely chosen to leave in the first place.

"Claudia," Steven said, wondering why his wife looked so suddenly glum. "I do not have any news on General Garret for Gary. I sent a text."

Claudia nodded. "I know." Although that was important, it wasn't why she broke all protocol and popped into their flat. "I got your message about Diana."

"Oh, my God! Claudia!" Yesenia quickly cut her off and shared what had transpired with the Zarant Border Guard.

Fifteen

October 23, 2045.

Three days after Calvin died in their quarantine bed a man, with light-brown shaggy hair that spilled to the frame of his Poindexter glasses, appeared at Jon's front door. Sara mentioned that someone would be contacting him, but she had not said that it would be done in-person, a detail that would have arrested his shock when he found a stranger with a set jaw, eyeing him suspiciously, on the other side of his front door.

"You called in sick today," the man said flatly, letting himself into Jon's apartment.

The stranger's intellectual, yet disheveled appearance, ubiquitous amongst the intellectual types, softened the threat he felt. Pushing his own Poindexter glasses up the bridge of his nose, he poked his head into the hallway where gobs of people were already loitering. Relief washed over him when there were no military guards waiting in the wings.

Jon took a deep breath as he reminded himself that he'd done nothing to draw Zaran's eye. It was what he was about to do that would put his life in jeopardy.

"I called in sick today?" Jon said, as he stepped aside to let the stranger in. He was trying not to let his nerves get the better of him.

When he turned his back to the stranger to lock his apartment front door, his world went dark.

It took a few minutes for his brain to organize his thoughts into some coherent pattern. As the fog cleared, it dawned on him that he was no longer inside of the SunSafe. Judging from the quantity of sweat being leached out of every one of his pores, his body had also taken note of the environmental change.

Jon's watch showed a timelapse of fifteen minutes. How had he been removed from the SF SunSafe in fifteen minutes? How? And where was he? Disoriented and dizzy, he focused his eyes on the moguls dotting the landscape, letting them come into focus as his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

His breath caught. "Those... those are—" He began hyperventilating. A hand on his shoulder caused him to spin around. A stranger. Not the same guy who had come for him to his apartment. "Oh! Where's—" He couldn't finish a thought. His eyes ping-ponged about, looking between the death-humps on the ground and the stranger—so many questions. "Those..." he pointed at the lumps on the ground, one after another. There were so many moguls that his finger seemed to do nothing more than doodle in the air. "Those are humans." Jon closed his eyes and took a deep, long breath. Then, he did it again while his right hand still pointed outward. When he opened his eyes, he again inspected the landscape. His eyes briefly paused over each lump and mound they skimmed over. "They're all made up of dead people... so many of them."

As a doctor, Jon accepted death as a consequence of life; with that said, death was literally carpeting the ground around them. Heaps, some as small as a child's body, others piled high, reaching as high as a house. Literal mounds of death ran out into the night.

As if noticing it for the first time, the acrid stench of decomposition stabbed at his nostrils and his brain clicked, connecting the smell to the death surrounding him. Without a word, Jon leaned forward and puked, purging everything he had eaten in the last month, or so it felt.

His first instinct was to turn and run away, to find somewhere to think, but before he could take his first step, a large man with an intimidating glare took hold of his right arm. Where had he come from? Clarence was constructed into a sturdy 6'4" frame, and fortified with pure muscle. His extremities had their own sizable mounds defining them. On the contrary, Jon was short and as thin as a rail. His arms were not much thicker than one of his captor's wrists. By the looks of it, Clarence could probably hold both of his arms with one hand.

"Are you... wait!" Glancing around, it dawned on him that the shaggy haired man was nowhere in sight. Panic replaced his nausea, though the need was still there, only pushed aside. Truth be told, a goulash of confusing emotions was swirling around inside of him,

but the most primal one was fear. “The other man... the one that brought me here?” But how had he done it? How had he brought him there!

Jon’s mind was running away from him. All of a sudden, he was sure that the man at his door had been from Zarant. He’d somehow drugged him, and he was put out here to die. But in fifteen minutes? Impossible? The confusion was making him want to lie down, but he couldn’t. Corpses lay everywhere. Oh! His stomach. He wanted to puke again! Dry heaves! Suddenly he was acutely aware of being miserably frightened for his life.

“Calm down,” Gary said. Jon had taken on a pallor and his eyes had dilated from fear. “Steven had to go back to the SunSafe.” Gary placed his hands on Jon’s shoulders to keep him steady.

The man before him stood about a hand shorter than the 6’4” man. Yet somehow, the shorter man frightened him more. Not that he did not find both men intimidating in their own way. When they moved, their arms swelled and mountains moved. They both had multiple firearms: a handgun in the small of their backs, one strapped to each hip, one on the right thigh, and Jon could only assume there were others hidden beneath their loose-fitting hemp attire.

“I am Clarence, he’s Gary. Now, let us move. We need to get as far north as possible before sunrise,” Clarence said, looking Jon over with amusement.

Jon had been trying to estimate the average time of death of the masses, based on decomposition, but quickly gave up on the task. With such extreme natural conditions, it was likely the corpses underwent an expedited decomposition process.

A new thought made Jon want to wretch again, but his stomach had already been emptied. “It’s the human body mounds that smell,” Jon was speaking to no one in particular, only reasoning out that the bodies at the bottom of the piles were still rotting. “And where are all of the rats?” Given the carnage, the rat population should have exploded, but there were none in sight.

“We wondered the same thing. Whatever disease these people were carrying, it must have affected all living organisms.” Shaking his head, Clarence said, “Let’s hope enough time has lapsed, and that whatever the virus was, that it has died.”

Missing his step, Jon dug his hands into his pockets to keep them from inadvertently touching anything. Gary and Clarence led him to a souped-up jeep with big tires that lifted

the passenger cage four feet off the ground. Walking around it, Jon smiled. Two large fog lights were attached to the bumper, adding to the rugged façade. The extra canisters and tires strapped to the jeep's top and tail racks had an appealing masculine effect on him. Never in his life did Jon think he would ride in a car, much less a jeep that looked like it came straight out of a vintage military action movie.

"Those are great tires!" Jon crooned as the jeep started moving.

"We needed them, otherwise we'd spend all night driving around all of the bodies."

Testosterone flight struck Jon. He wished he had not heard that. He hadn't considered that they would have to drive over dead people.

They spoke little that first night. Death occupied every thread of thought, every current of energy. Jon mulled over much the same questions: Why would Zarant murder so many people, and with what sort of virus? And, how could it have been allowed to happen?

Deep in thought, Clarence murmured something about so many people dying and having no one to mourn them. His comment somehow made the silence weigh heavier. And still, no one spoke. Jon focused on the landscape. He decided that it would be pretty if he didn't know it was human skeletons that were picking up the moon's luminescence. Gary sat in the driver's seat unaware he was clenching his teeth. His thoughts were on the past and on those that he blamed—multinationals and self-serving politicians.

They drove until dawn, about five hours. It was a slow pace they were forced to take with all the pot holes, chunks of missing roads, and obstacles to maneuver around. That day's shelter came in the form of a basement below an abandoned home.

Although he didn't say it out loud, Jon was relieved that whomever had taken shelter there before them had bothered to clear out the bodies. He had seen enough death for one night.

"It is all dusty. Does not look like they're coming back." Clarence kicked aside blankets and empty food cans that had been left behind.

The next evening, Jon noticed that the further from the East Bay they got, fewer bodies carpeted the roads, and large burnt pyres began to spring up. Cremation mounds, as Jon haphazardly termed them, outnumbered the burnt rubber mounds by at least two to one. It was the white, human bones that picked up the moonlight that made them easier to spot.

Unwittingly, Jon stepped into a sore subject that existed between Gary and Clarence when he wondered out loud at Zarent's efforts to cremate the dead. Clarence assiduously shook his head and worked to assure him that that was the only thing Zarent was not responsible for. Jon regretted his comment, but it was too late. Clarence proceeded to fall into a funk, repeatedly snapping at any meaningless comment either he or Gary made.

Exasperation eventually strained Gary's voice. "Clarence, we've been below ground twenty-three years. We only surfaced recently to find... this! We do not even know what caused this." Clarence groaned, and Gary continued, "Or what we are up against. I would not even know where to start."

Jon sensed Clarence's hackles rise from the back seat.

"We attack Zarent's servers, Gary!"

The acerbity in Clarence's cadence caused Gary to stop the truck. "Enough, Clarence," he growled, a warning embedded in his voice.

The tension in the jeep thickened when Clarence locked eyes with Gary. Clarence debated whether to press his case when Jon broke the standoff.

"Well," Jon debated whether or not he should get involved, but then decided he needed to, for all of their sakes. "You can't hack into Zarent's servers, not unless you're inside of Zarent Headquarters and tapped into the main server." There had been the occasional rebel hackers who had been swept up, after having been forced to walk under the sun, and brought into the triage center. "The multinationals' servers are partitioned. Zarent Industry's primary servers are offline standalone servers. The servers that operate online are for the four *remaining* multinationals; and even then, no sensitive information is kept on them," Jon explained. Their ignorance on the subject led Jon to speculate that Gary and Clarence were redlined rebels. It next occurred to him that they were more likely to do something stupid and get themselves killed than to take down the multinationals. He had already put his life at risk by leaving the SunSafe. That was enough risk for him. "Just give the notion up, because it's impossible."

Gary's eyes shot to the rear-view mirror and Jon quickly busied himself with the abandoned town outside of his window. It bothered him that Gary could make him squirm with a mere look. "Enough, Clarence! This is a Nest matter and not for public consumption."

Jon wished one of them would tell him what the Nest was, or where it existed. Every time he tried to ask Gary or Clarence about it, his question was ignored. Clearly, they didn't think he needed to know.

Silence tiptoed back into the jeep's cabin. Clarence was in the front passenger seat, chewing on his anger. He was not angry with Gary. After all, Gary had a valid point. What good would it do to go after the multinationals if it would only lead to the Nest's destruction.

"Look, all I'm saying is that we need to have our own people inside of Zarant. Otherwise, how could we ever prepare if they attack us? At the very least, we shouldn't have been surprised that Zarant operates off of an offline server. That's the stuff we need to know."

Jon's eyes grew big and round, but he kept his silence. Who were these people inside the jeep with him? They spoke as though they thought themselves capable rivals to Zarant. He thought they might be delusional, but wouldn't disabuse them of the notion. It was better, he decided, not to draw Gary's ire. Again.

Despite Clarence's insistence, Gary remained firmly opposed to embedding Claudia inside of the SF SunSafe. Clarence was certain she was their best bet, and Claudia said as much herself. But Gary refused to consider it and wouldn't give a reason. *That* was what had Clarence so hot under the collar.

The night sky had kindly plopped a fat moon mid-sky. A good thing, since Gary refused to use the jeep's headlamps to illuminate their path. In fact, the prior night, during the darkness, the jeep's right front tire plunged in and out of a deep rut in the road that caused the bumper to slam into the hard earth. Luckily, they had not been moving too fast. The impact had been so hard that Jon was sure the jeep had been rendered useless. Happily, he could not have been more wrong.

An aching back brought on from sleeping on concrete floors for the last two days made certain Jon felt every bump on the road. The abandoned homes they'd spent the night in had no furniture left in them. Gary mentioned something about them being used as fuel for bonfires and tire pyres. Remnants of burnt furnishings were still visible everywhere, particularly in the center of what once were street intersections. Jon imagined the mattresses had provided the best fuel.

It must have been depressing and ugly when all of the pyres were burning. The world had to have appeared as though it were burning to its final end. Everywhere Jon looked, his mind found food for thought. He couldn't imagine how the people survived the food shortages, the crime, and the chaos. It all seemed so insurmountable to him. As those thoughts occurred in his head, he kept all thoughts of his parents out, especially after seeing Oakland and realizing that everyone there was dead.

After two nights of travel over badly deteriorated roads, Jon felt as if he were about to shatter into a million little pieces from all of the bouncing around. As things were, he felt as if his nerves were completely wracked. Also, his body had yet to accept the nocturnal schedule. It seemed cruel that the lack of sleep left him feeling edgy and exhausted, and then he had to be tossed about in the jeep with two of the most obstinate men he'd ever met.

"I'm sorry, but aren't there smoother roads that we can take? I am completely rattled," Jon asked, just as a big yawn struck him.

Gary glanced over at Clarence for help, since it hadn't been his idea to bring Jon along. In fact, they had not been given a choice. Sara, Steven's contact, hooked Gary by sharing the feed of the parasite leaving the patient's nose, and then she conditioned Jon be allowed to tag along. She left them no choice in the matter, not if they wanted to know where the patient had come from.

"Jon," Clarence cleared his throat to scrape off some of the roughness, "all major highways and roads through the North Bay are barricaded. Only Zarant Military transports have access, if they even travel this far north anymore." The base in his voice was so deep that Jon thought he could feel it in his bones, or maybe the vibrating sensation was due to his fragile state. "Besides, there are miles and miles of abandoned cars on the freeways and highways that have accumulated over the years. Many of which are still occupied by dead people."

"So no, there are no smoother roads available to us," Gary inserted firmly.

Jon sank in his seat, deflated. Next, he wondered how Dr. Saenz even knew these people. How did she communicate with them? And how did they get him from his apartment in the SF SunSafe to the East Bay in 15 minutes? Without Zarant Military being any the wiser? He had so many questions, but their response was always silence.

Once they got beyond the East Bay, the quantity of drivable roads diminished significantly. Roads had either been covered by dirt, blocked, or washed away by storms and whatever havoc they wreaked. Jon shut his eyes tight and shook his head. The jeep's suspension, like his nerves, was being tested with every plunge and dive of the tires that rocked the passenger carriage like a ship in rough waters. A hyperventilating spell triggered inside of Jon when his stomach began somersaulting.

Hiding the amused smile on his lips, Clarence emptied out a plastic bag from the glove compartment, that held the jeep's previous owner's manual, and held it over his shoulder for Jon to take.

Gary watched the entire episode through the rear-view mirror, his eyes darted between the darkness before him and their young passenger. Shaking his head, he grumbled something about being forced to bring Jon along.

After wiping his mouth, Jon opened the window and flung the bag with his stomach contents out. Embarrassed for having shown weakness, Jon hoped to take the attention off himself by commenting on a subject that lingered in his thoughts.

"I can't understand how all of these people were left without government aid and resources. I can't begin to imagine how you all have survived!"

Gary was annoyed, and that annoyance was on display in both his cadence and the tightness around his eyes, which happened to be perfectly framed in the rear-view mirror. "How old are you?" He asked.

"Twenty-two."

"So, you've been in the SunSafe most of your life?"

"Yes, sir." Feeling intimidated, he defaulted to the same respectful tone he had once reserved for his father. "Eighteen years."

Clarence thought it strange that Jon was only twenty-two and had finished medical school, until he recalled that medical school was not at all like what it used to be. Doctors did very little with the human body anymore. Steven had briefly explained that humanoid doctors had replaced most human doctors. Only a few had been kept on until AI surpassed human knowledge. After that, doctors like Sara and Jon would become displaced.

"The middle-class in the SunSafe—"

“No longer exists. Most of my friends, they risk their lives and participate in the protests. Some have recently taken to sit-ins along the wealthier Skywalks to remind them that we are still there, and that we are human, just like them.” The darkness outside of his window that he had initially found so peaceful, suddenly seemed lonely. “Many of those very same friends have since disappeared. Zarrant Military always takes them away during the night.”

They passed fewer homes now.

That the middle-class had already disappeared from the SF SunSafe surprised Gary and Clarence. Forced to concede that Jon had valuable information for Lazador, Gary sent Clarence a ping to let him know that Jon would not be returned to the SF SunSafe.

Conversation helped Jon keep his mind off his disgruntled stomach.

“You mentioned that you’re FBI and you’re CIA,” Jon said, nodding to Gary and Clarence, respectively. “Have your organizations ever attempted to remove Zachary from power?” Jon clearly had no understanding of what Lazador’s Nest was. He thought it was some clandestine government intelligence agency, or operation.

The first night on the road, Clarence felt obliged to share their former employment with Jon. The kid had been nervous about his first night outside of the SF SunSafe, and about taking shelter in the basement of an abandoned home where they found spent bullet casings on the ground. It had been his way of trying to soothe Jon’s fears, to let him know they were trained and capable of taking care of themselves in dangerous situations. However, Clarence failed to mention that it had been over twenty years since they last trained, or were active in the field.

“Ex. We are ex-FBI and ex-CIA. Those Bureaus no longer exist. Also, yes. A long time ago,” Gary said, in such a cold and mechanical way that Clarence couldn’t help wonder why Jon bothered Gary so much. “The multinationals have always had the Supreme Court and Government in their pockets.” Gary made a mental note that Clarence, or Claudia, would be the best qualified to interview Jon when the time came. Gary could not, and Michelle and Edward wouldn’t know what questions to ask.

“Which is why,” Clarence took over the history lesson Gary clearly didn’t want to give, “as time went on, those institutions lost their credibility. As a consequence, when Government finally decided to act for the *benefit* of the people, it was too late. Once the

almighty institutions of the United States lost their power, the dominoes fell as foreign governments were bowed. And, well, here we are.”

The jeep gave a harsh jolt, and Clarence found himself bracing against the dash. Jon’s hands shot to the roof to keep from bumping his head.

The generous dollop of moon looked down on them as they came upon a small, abandoned town. Like the other towns, burnt cars sat in the most random of places. Power lines had fallen over onto homes, cars, and in some cases, onto the road itself. The once strong redwood poles, long ago eaten away by termites and weather, made it easy to lift them out of the way.

Burnt tire pyres forced them to drive around most intersections. Jon noticed that none, so far, had the tell of white human bones.

Forgetting for a moment the tragedy surrounding them, Jon admired the few standing homes. They were huge when compared to the micro apartments they were forced to live in inside of the SF SunSafe. Seeing the homes made him wonder what kind of lives they’d housed. Wealthy ones. Who else could afford to buy such large homes?

Something moved in the darkness and Jon jolted in his seat.

“Wait! Wait! I see people!” Four bearded men wearing tattered clothing were towing bicycles as they ran into a half-collapsed home.

“Holdouts,” Gary informed him and kept on driving.

“But shouldn’t we...?” He did not know what he was going to say. He felt like they should stop and help them, or just stop and maybe learn a bit about them and how they’ve survived.

“No. They are holdouts. They do not want to be bothered. Besides, they are most likely armed.” Gary checked in the rear-view mirror. He wanted to be certain the men weren’t being sneaky and coming up on them. “As we get further out, away from San Francisco, you’ll start seeing more people.” At least that was how it worked when they first instituted the SunSafe lottery. “Those are the towns who are still waiting to be admitted to the SunSafe.” He looked into the rear-view mirror again, this time at Jon, whose head was turned towards the window at his right. His eyeballs were jumping about, no doubt searching for more holdouts. “They are the ones who will next be inheriting your ghettos, if they ever get into the SF SunSafe,” which Gary doubted would ever happen. “But we’ll

be driving around those communities, because they won't run and hide. They'll come at us assuming we're part of the power structure that has abandoned them." Gary's tone was so flat and dry when he spoke that it gave his words a sense of grieving.

"The last time we drove through an occupied city, over by Bakersfield, this was right before we went underground, the residents swarmed my van. I was trying to cut through a small group of people that kept on growing. They surrounded me and began rocking my poor baby until they flipped her over." Clarence lovingly recalled his beautiful, souped-up van as he recounted the story. Jon could hear the loss he still felt in his voice. "They lit my baby's tires on fire... didn't even have the decency to take them off before lighting them up."

Jon shook his head and felt sorry for Clarence's loss. The giant, thick man spoke of his van as if it had been his only child.

Gradually, the scenery outside of the window left the tragedy of past lives behind them and transformed itself into a dark and empty desert.

"Where are we?" Jon asked, as he glanced at the odometer that told him they were moving at a thirty miles per hour clip.

The slow pace and expansive desert scenery reminded him that he'd been in the jeep for far too many hours. His bottom was sore and so were his back and neck. His stomach, on the other hand, had finally mellowed out.

"We are in rural country. The cities, or what used to be the cities, are behind us. This is a good place to find shelter," Gary spoke with his eyes squinted as he tried his best to keep the jeep on the rough road. "Hang on," he warned.

Heeding the warning, Clarence grabbed onto the overhead bar and steadied himself as the Jeep's front right tire climbed over a large rock. Jon was not quick enough with the reflexes and his body went airborne. His head careened into the roof of the jeep, instantaneously stopping his upward trajectory.

"Ouch!" Jon cried, rubbing the side of his head, hoping he hadn't given himself a concussion.

"I said hold on."

"You sure we're still on a road?"

“I can assure you of it. At least the parts that have not been washed away. They must be getting some freak rainstorms up here. Half of the hillsides are gone.”

Jon looked up and saw the jagged mountain silhouette. It explained why several parts of the road were missing. They were buried under several feet of mountainside that had broken off and slid down, burying everything in its path. He shivered as he wondered how many people had been buried alive.

Clarence never seemed to worry about the road. He left that up to Gary. He’d already moved on to looking for a place to stop for shelter. An abandoned home was most ideal, so that they wouldn’t have to resort to having three grown men sharing a single, two-hundred-square-foot, insulated, solar-proof tent for eight hours, especially since the tent provided no real protection from a sudden storm, should one strike while they’re sleeping.

The jeep creaked, and the engine groaned. They were in desolate country. The horizon was lumpy with the mountainside on the left and flat nothingness on the right. Darkness filled the empty space between them and everything else.

Jon’s mind began chasing shadows, suddenly fearing they’d get stuck out there without food and water. He could feel his blood pressure rising with every accelerated beat of his heart. Chancing a glance behind him, he released a long, quiet breath. Two rows of six gasoline containers stood in perfect formation behind him. Just above them, there was a wire rack with three tanks of water. He knew there were three more tied to the top of the jeep. A second, long exhale was released, and he could feel his heart settling again.

“There,” Clarence said, relieved. “Up ahead to the right of the road. Next to that boulder. That looks like a nice one.”

Gary put the jeep in park and hung his arms over the steering wheel. “That look occupied to you?” It was perfectly intact, but that did not mean much. It could just be sturdy construction.

Clarence leaned forward as if the few inches would give him a better look. “Hard to tell. Wait here. I’ll go look.”

Gary shook his head. “No, I’ll go.” Taking the gun from the dashboard, he got out of the jeep before Clarence could beat him out. The age of his bones made itself known just then, but Gary quieted those thoughts and told himself it was time to hand the reins over

to Claudia. He'd officially become too old for bumpy, multi-day road trips. Besides, with their neurochip technology, he could easily tether in on a mission.

"Is he always this bossy?"

"Always," Clarence said, with a preoccupied cadence. He was leaning forward, focusing on the home, searching its perimeter for movement.

The night sky made it difficult to keep an eye on Gary's progress. His dark silhouette sauntered up to the home, not trying to hide in case there were occupants watching him. It was his way of sending a signal that he was safe and not a threat.

There must have been a sensor on an outdoor circuit that Gary triggered, because a floodlight flipped on and a person came out the front door, pointing a shotgun right at Gary.

"Wait here," Clarence groaned, as he quietly exited the jeep.

Gary's hands were up in the air and Jon assumed that he was trying to talk his way out of the situation, but he was too far away to hear anything to know for sure.

Unlike Gary, Clarence made himself as small as possible, which wasn't small at all, as he ran in a zigzag fashion with his gun drawn. When he reached the backside of the home, he pressed himself up against it and slowly made his way around. When he reached the edge, he peeked around the corner and saw that the shotgun-wielding woman was only a couple of feet away. With celerity, he moved behind her and gently placed the cold nuzzle of his gun against her temple.

"Clarence, it is alright. She is alright. She is just protecting her family." Gary turned his attention back to the woman whose blood had drained from her face. "Ma'am, like I said, we mean you no harm. We just need shelter from the sun. I promise, we will leave tonight and you and your family will remain unharmed. Clarence, I said put it down."

Clarence backed away but kept the gun pointed, impressed that the woman held her ground until she saw Jon walking up her drive, holding a bag. She knew she would be no match for the three of them, so she lowered her gun and said a silent prayer that they were good men.

"What do you all want up here? No one has come up these roads in years! I am surprised anyone even know they exist anymore."

Gary saw no harm in being honest with her. "This gentleman works at a triage center for the San Francisco SunSafe. Recently, a man from Yreka arrived with a strange illness. We are headed there to investigate."

"So, you all work for that, that—"

"No, ma'am. He's the only one who works for the multinationals." Gary gave his head another slight tilt towards Jon. "You can keep him if you'd like."

Jon couldn't tell if he was kidding, so he swung around to look at Gary's face, but that wasn't very helpful either.

"Clarence and I live off the grid, just like you, with a few thousand other folks." Her eyes grew wide at the mention of the number of people. She hadn't heard of any other large, off-grid communities like theirs. Neither had Jon, who was equally impressed.

The thirty-something-year-old woman kept her hair in a bun. Gary found her slender and attractive. She was tough and fiercely protective of her home, much like his daughters.

"The man, the one you said came to the triage." Her eyes filled with hope as she asked, "Is he with you?" A mournful headshake from Gary confirmed her fears. "Poor Calvin," she said, loud enough for Gary to hear. She said something else, but she mumbled it and Gary's ears couldn't pick it up.

"You knew him? Calvin?" Jon asked, pleasantly surprised.

Patti nodded. "He and Rashida, they were our neighbors. Rashida died a few weeks ago, as did my husband, and everyone else." Her words were a hard, bitter pill coated in a wrapper of determination. Through so much loss, she was determined to survive. A sudden thought made her meet Gary's eyes, but then she seemed to change her mind and looked away. "Anyway, you are wasting your time going up there. Everyone is dead. Some kind of virus. I'm surprised Calvin made it all of the way to the SunSafe."

What Gary's mind latched onto was the fact that she had somehow survived.

He could see that she was searching her memory for something, so he held his question, hoping she'd share whatever information she could.

"All I know is that he and my husband were summoned to town. They had just come back from a scouting mission in Oregon's Siskiyou mountains. Said they needed to be deposed." Tears made her eyes gleam in the moonlight. "He went to town and never came

back. Neither did Rashida. We were supposed to have joined, since the Mayor wanted all town's people there, but my boys weren't feeling so well." Wiping the tears away, she said, "I happened to be making my way to town to search for my husband when I ran into Calvin. He told me to go home and shut off all of the lights. He said he was going to go to the SunSafe and get help. He told me under no circumstance should I go to town." She looked haunted.

"May we come inside?" Gary lightly pressed. He was tired and could use a seat.

Patti ignored Gary's suggestion and kept talking. It was absolutely liberating to be able to share her sorrow with another human being. She has had to be strong for her boys. "The next day, a letter was at my door. Calvin explained that everyone, including his wife and my husband, were dead. He believed he had been infected, but he never said how, or with what."

"Do you know about when that was? Approximately?" Gary was trying to figure out how Calvin got to the SunSafe on his own. It took them nine nights to get to the south end of Yreka. It seemed more than plausible that Calvin could have gotten there faster on a motorcycle, but not much faster.

"You know, before it all got so bad, we used to go to Shasta for supplies. One day, out of the blue, Ard and Marta came back and told us that they were all dead... and that the hospital had been shuttered. They were murdered, you know." Her resentment was focused on Jon, the Zarant employee. "By that CEO's Military. Fumigated like rats. And what did our government do about it? Senator Duarte made some generic statement about the heinous crime and then handed the town's remaining natural resources to the multinationals."

Gary could feel Clarence's eyes on him. "What about Yreka?" Gary said, taking her back to his question. Shasta would have to wait for another day.

She closed her eyes and took a moment. Then, as if the reel were playing in her mind, she spoke. "I was hoping Calvin was wrong, so I made my way up there. That was a few weeks ago, maybe a month. That is the best I can remember. Anyway, there were quarantine signs everywhere—and bodies." Patti blinked back the tears and gathered her resolve. She could not afford to show weakness around three strange men. They needed to see that she would fight to her death to protect her children.

“Did you have a look around?”

Turning to Clarence, she scowled and shook her head. “There were warning signs and dead bodies everywhere. I have two children who depend on me. I could not risk dying on them, so I came home and prayed to the sky above that it wasn’t an airborne transmission type of disease.” Seeing the sun rings in the distance, she turned and began walking towards the house. “We should go in, twilight’s approaching.” All the while, she kept her gun ready to use.

When they walked into the home, Gary noticed the modern touch inside. It was a sharp contrast to the log cabin facade. At the far right of the room, he saw two boys sitting at a table doing some type of homework. They seemed to have a softening effect on him.

Patti caught the paternal change in Gary’s mood and said, “I homeschool them.”

Gary nodded, sympathetically. “I am Gary, by the way. This is Clarence, and that’s Jon.”

She gave them a polite nod, even though her eyes said she’d rather they not be there.

“Are you hungry?” Their slackened jaws let her know that they were. “I’ve got some potatoes boiling, a pot of black beans, and some tomatoes. It’s not much, but it’s something. All the food was kept inside the shed in Yreka, and I can’t bring myself to go there.” She placed the gun on the counter, within reach. “I guess I will have to go soon. We are almost out of everything.” After Yreka’s supply ran out, she didn’t know what she would do.

Jon’s eyes peeled back so far that it seemed cartoonish. “You have real vegetables?”

“I do, but barely enough to call what we’re eating a meal. What does your underground community eat?” She asked Clarence and Gary.

“Our Nest... community subsists on a vegan diet as well.” Clarence replied, hoping to ease Patti further. He was aware of his intimidating size, and he wanted her to feel certain that he was not a threat.

A curious look came about her. “How do you grow it all? And where? Everything I plant dies. I have an indoor garden downstairs, in the basement that is just enough for us, but that’s it. Light is not my problem. I have plenty of plant lights and seeds, but water...now that’s going to doom us all. We get the occasional, thunderous, flash floods, but no real substantial rainfall. Not enough to fill our water wells.”

“We have a similar operation.”

Patti could see that Gary was not keen on sharing much more about their community. He merely told her enough to earn her trust, and that was all he was going to say.

Jon was salivating, wondering if all communities outside of the SunSafes had access to real food. He could not wait to share everything he’d experienced with Sara. She probably wouldn’t believe half of everything he said. It all sounded so fantastical, even to him, and he was living proof of the experience! He’d had apples and dried fruit with nuts for breakfast the last nine days. His meals consisted of beans and rice with vegetables, completely different from what he ate in the SunSafe, which was a gloopy mess that seemed to crawl out of the jar on its own.

Gary looked at Clarence, who went over to the front door and picked up Jon’s duffel bag, from which he fished out a few apples and placed them on the counter.

“Please accept this as a token of our appreciation.”

Patti looked at the red and green apples as if they were gold.

“May I?” She asked, glancing at her boys.

“They are yours. We completely understand if you do not want to share with Jon.”

The apples were a tad bruised and some were overripe, but no one in that house would care. Jon certainly had not.

Again, Jon became worried. He was unable to tell whether Gary was kidding or not. Luckily, Patti did not seem to mind sharing.

That evening, as they prepared to drive off, Patti leaned into the cab of the jeep and said, “If you have room for us in your community, please come back for us. If only for my boys. I can make do.”

Gary nodded. A grateful smile spread across her mouth and she backed away and watched them until they disappeared into the darkness.

They drove for a couple of hours in the outskirts of town until they found an abandoned home not too far from downtown. It had a large garage to stash their jeep in, which pleased Gary because it spared them from having to take everything out of the jeep for the night. The home had a wraparound porch that, aside from the accumulated sand and dirt piles along its base, featured beautiful handcrafted wood furniture.

As they inspected the property for occupants, Gary noticed that the home had multiple above ground water tanks, all full. There were also solar panels and multiple large propane tanks, which meant they would have access to hot water and electricity.

Clarence insisted on looking for a key before resorting to breaking a window to gain access, reasoning that the home hadn't been abandoned too long ago, which meant the occupants might still return. He preferred it if they didn't have to walk into a home full of dust, sand, or critters.

Jon said nothing.

After a few minutes of searching, Jon found the key. It had been placed on the top of the porch light.

"See, Gary? I told you. People out here are not like city folk."

"That's an old saying, now don't get cocky, Clarence. Let us just go in."

Clarence grinned and pretended to saunter in behind Jon.

When Jon opened the door, he got a huge whiff of lavender potpourri. Bowls of it had been left all around the home. Perhaps the owners put it out with the intention of not coming back to a smelly home.

"Wow! This place is nice! It is perfectly... immaculately kept. And it is huge!" Jon began moving around, taking every square-foot in. He had never seen such a beautifully furnished home with so many windows. The huge L-shaped kitchen took his breath away, and the soft, calfskin couch suited him much better than the back seat of that rumbling jeep.

Perhaps the owner had every intention of coming back, but for the moment, the home was clearly abandoned. The food in the refrigerator had gone rancid and the dirty dishes in the dishwasher had grown mold. The windows, except for a small one to let the light in, had thick beige honeycombed shades between the window and a layer of what looked like thick cotton mats stapled around the trim, which Gary surmised did an excellent job of keeping the heat out.

The basement was a masterpiece. Clarence summed it up to being about eighteen-hundred-square-feet. It was very well stocked with airtight bags of beef and turkey jerky. Water bottles, canned fruits and vegetables, and cases of cheap whiskey were stacked

from floor to ceiling. And the back wall was covered with all sorts of guns and ammunitions.

Clarence made a mental note to jot down an unobstructed GPS location so they could Transport the food supplies and weapons to the Nest.

“Hey, check this out. It is good we have a jeep!”

They looked over and saw Jon holding individually wrapped Twinkies. There were boxes and boxes of them, along with chocolate cream-filled cupcakes.

“Oh, man. I want one.” Clarence took one of each. Gary had gotten into the beef jerky.

At approximately 8:00p.m., they gathered their backpacks and walked towards Yreka’s downtown. They did not have to walk too far before they started seeing bodies. Jon had the foresight to stuff three clean socks with lavender potpourri for them to tie over their mouths and noses.

“Well, it was a good idea,” Clarence said, as he removed the potpourri-filled sock from his face and let it fall to the ground.

Jon and Gary agreed and did the same.

The lavender potpourri had only worsened the stench of death.

“Look somewhere near the head. Whatever it is that killed these people, if it’s the same thing that killed that guy, Calvin, then it crawled out of their nostrils, curled up and shutdown nearby.”

“So, you really think everyone here was murdered with the same *robotic parasite*?” Jon said, calling the “thing” by the name Gary used for it. “Didn’t you say that Zarant Military showed up to the East Bay with hazmat suits and likely injected a highly contagious virus into the population? Isn’t it more likely that same scenario played out here?”

A virus would make more sense, and it was likely what the multinationals wanted every passerby to believe. But Gary had seen those little silver balls before, and how they worked.

“I know Zachary well. He is the only man I know who would take such a medical marvel as the robotic parasite and turn it into something lethal.” Gary wiped anger-spittle from his lower lip.

“Oh! Here is one!” Jon said, reaching for the imperfectly round metal marble, just like the one that came out of Calvin’s nose.

“Stop! I just said not to touch it!” Gary warned as he ran over to where Jon was and moved him back.

Clarence suspected that Jon reminded Gary too much of Jimmy and that was why he was constantly snapping at the young man.

Clarence and Gary kneeled on each side of Jon and leaned in to get a closer look. If Jon had not leaned back, they might have knocked him over.

“Oh. I was hoping you were wrong.” Clarence had his elbows in the dirt and his face three inches from the ground, opposite from Gary’s. The metal orb sat between them and the corpse had been completely forgotten.

“So was I,” Gary said, wiping the sweat off his face. How many mass genocide weapons did one billionaire need? “Scoop it up with something and we’ll take it back to the lab.” Gary had been thinking to himself that it would take someone like Zachary, a power-hungry narcissist, to reengineer a lifesaving technology into a life taking one, when Clarence’s baritone voice interrupted his thoughts.

“What do you think he’s up to?” Clarence asked, not at all liking the idea that Zachary was designing and stockpiling such lethal weapons.

“I don’t know and I don’t like it,” Gary said, identifying the dark heaps on the ground he assumed were other bodies. They were scattered everywhere. “How did Zachary manage to get one to every resident here?”

“Wait a minute.” Jon could not believe he’d heard them correctly. “You really think Zachary would give a community in Yreka a second thought?” Jon shook his head to say he didn’t agree. “I may be young and naïve in your eyes, but I’ve seen enough to know that Zachary doesn’t at all care about people outside of the SF SunSafe. He barely gives a thought to the residents of the West Side of the SF SunSafe, and that’s only because we’re a financial burden on him.”

Everything Jon said might be true, but Gary knew Zachary, which was why he was certain that Yreka was only part of something bigger. Something sinister. Something scary. His intuition told him to connect the oxygen conundrum with the genocide in Yreka, but he couldn’t see how.

Clarence scooped up the small orb with the hem of his shirt, then he looked around for something to carry it in.

Pulling Clarence aside, Gary said, “This was RASTRO technology. The Artificial Respirators were—”

“No need to say it, Gary.” Clarence had the same concern. “It is inevitable now, Gary. You see it, don’t you.”

Yes, Gary saw it, but he did not like it. Nonetheless, he knew Clarence was right. Lazador needed to have someone on the inside of Zarant Industries. Now.

“I’ll have Claudia reach out to Steven and Yesenia, see if they can’t formulate a plan together.”

That was agreeable to Clarence. At least it was a step in the right direction. As much as Gary wanted to have nothing to do with Zarant, it had become apparent that the multinational couldn’t be ignored. Lazador may be evolving into its own civilization, but they shared the planet and its resources with Zarant Industries. Inevitably, the actions of one people indirectly affected the other.

“What happens if the parasite is touched?” Jon asked, as Clarence used the hem of his shirt to collect another orb from the ground.

They needed something to carry the robotic parasites in. Gary wandered off for a few minutes, then came back with a sun-discolored plastic water bottle. It was empty and dry, but it had a screwcap lid.

After Clarence gave the bottle a onceover he dropped the pea-sized robotic parasites inside and rolled them a few times at the bottom of the bottle.

Enough with being ignored! Jon did not at all care that Clarence and Gary perceived him as naïve, that was fine. What he did mind was being dismissed and ignored. Like Gary and Clarence, Jon had a job to do, and he needed answers to do it. Sara forced them to take Jon along because she wanted answers to her questions. She knew that Jon would be forthcoming about everything he saw and learned. Jon was necessary because Sara didn’t know Gary and Clarence from the next guy.

“Guys, I don’t know why you feel like you need to treat me like I’m some kind of annoying static noise that needs to be shut out. I asked a question. Please, tell me what happens if you touch the parasite?” Jon asked again, determined to get an answer.

Amused by Jon's burst of courage, Gary acquiesced. "Body heat activates it. Once it unfurls itself, it gets into a body through the nearest pore, or open wound, and it happens rather quickly. The original version of the robotic parasite was designed to enter the bloodstream and swim its way towards the heart. As it moved, it was supposed to provide a live video feed of the artery walls. Its primary mission was to search for damaged arteries and blood clots and repair them. You see, the robotic parasite can chew blood clots away. If a stint is needed, its tail can serve as one by expanding and then attaching itself into place."

"After it has done its job, the parasite exits and becomes this ball, ready to be used again," Clarence added. "But instead of saving lives, it seems to have been modified to take them."

Jon looked back and forth between them. "How is it that you guys know so much about this, this parasite?"

Gary and Clarence looked at each other. For a minute it seemed as if they were actually communicating without speaking. Then, Clarence shrugged as if to say it was up to Gary, and Gary nodded. "We did not cause this, if that's what you're asking. A friend of ours developed this technology years ago. Zachary bankrupted his company."

"What you two are saying is that this really *is* a bonified genocide?" Jon interrupted Gary while he paced back and forth. He hadn't spoken about all of the death in the East Bay, because he'd left room in his mind for the possibility of disease. But Gary and Clarence had been grumbling for over a week now about Zarant and the East Bay being Zachary's genocide. And now, once again, to find corpses lying everywhere! None of what he had seen over the last week made sense to him anymore. "Why would Zachary, or any SunSafe multinational, care at all about far flung communities?"

"Resources are limited and finite. Particularly water." Clarence recalled that Zarant Industries had their own vertical gardens, and that they engineered most of the food the SunSafes relied on in a lab. Of course, that information was over fifteen years old. Either way, food may be scarce, but not as scarce as water in a region where it never rained. "Also, take into consideration that multinationals have historically been apex resource hoarders."

“No, I see it now,” Jon said, conceding that he didn’t need to reach into his wildest imagination to arrive at genocide. “So, what did these people have that the multinationals wanted?”

Attaboy. The smile on Clarence’s lips indicated that he liked the way Jon was thinking.

“That’s what we need to go into town to investigate,” Gary said, already walking towards the town’s center.

Jon hurried to catch up to Gary and Clarence, thinking that he was tired of seeing so much death. Everywhere he looked, there were bodies. As a doctor, his entire purpose in life revolved around saving lives, but the last several days had left him feeling helpless, and useless.

“Guys, why the guns?” Jon did not like guns. They made him uncomfortable. Besides, it seemed pretty obvious that everyone in town was dead.

“You need to be quiet right now,” Clarence said, moving cautiously in the direction of Yreka’s downtown. “Someone infected these people, which means these people met their murderers, and they may still be lingering around.”

The night became darker and reduced their ability to see too far ahead. Still, they refrained from using their flashlights. Once they reached Main Street, Gary tilted his head to the left to tell Clarence to break off in that direction, as he went in the opposite direction. Jon hesitated for a moment, then peeled off towards Clarence, since Jon thought he was the nicer of the two.

Their search for survivors was fruitless so far, but they did not give up. A small grocery store stood at the end of the street. Inside, it was completely empty. The shelves had been converted into growing beds; but with no one around to water them, the plants had wilted and died. They found no signs of living people anywhere, so they turned to leave when a clattering noise stopped them. Clarence signaled with his hand for Jon to stay put, but Jon ignored it and followed him.

At the back of the store Clarence caught sight of the rats as they scurried into their hiding places. Clarence shook his head and turned towards the front door. He loathed the sight of rats.

“These people had it all! Solar panels and battery packs. Vegetable gardens. Clearly, they had a water supply if they were able to grow food.” Jon spent every moment he could

marveling at the vegetable beds, with their garden lights and rich soil. He wanted to take the equipment and seeds home and set it all up inside of his apartment, but it would be impossible. "From outside, the place looks like a ghost town. But these homes had electricity and running water. I cannot wait to get back to the SF SunSafe and tell Sara about it all!"

Clarence cast a curious look at Jon that he dismissed. Jon had no way of knowing that he would never be able to return to the SF SunSafe, nor did he know that Clarence had pinged the GPS location to Claudia for a team to come out and scavenge anything that was salvageable.

"They did," Clarence said, flipping off the light switch by the door. "You're wondering why they bothered to interact with Zarant, or anyone outside of their community?" Clarence used his neurochip to ping Gary as he asked Jon the question.

Reaching out to other communities during such necessitous times was a game of risk. If the wrong people caught wind of a self-sustaining community, there was a risk they'd come and try to take its wealth and resources for themselves. It was this human behavior that made Gary so tentative about making contact with *anyone* outside of Lazador's Nest. It made Clarence just as tentative, only he judged it as a necessary risk for Lazador's survival.

"Aren't you?" Jon had a look that said he would choose hermitage. "If I lived here, I would not reach out to anyone. I would do everything in my power to hide our existence."

"Well, as you can see, and as Patti said, something changed for them that forced them to leave their bubble. I do not know."

Eventually, they made their way towards the lights of the old Yreka Theater house. They found Gary sitting in a chair in the lobby, watching video footage on an old computer screen. Four men and one woman detailed what they saw on their mission to Oregon's Siskiyou mountains. Someone had bothered to leave the volume dials turned up as high as they could go, and then jimmied the ham radio to stay on and transmit the audio to anyone out there who happened to stumble onto their channel.

"Clarence!" Gary called out, when he heard Clarence and Jon enter. He turned to them and said, "You have to watch this debriefing. The video feed was programmed to loop. The broadcast is being picked up by the ham radio. And look at these. They've left maps

in case anyone hears their radio transmission and comes to investigate.” The old theater was still beautiful inside, but the video feed drew their full attention. “We need to get to Oregon. To this slaughterhouse.”

Sixteen

October 29, 2045.

A sullen breeze hesitantly pushed a twig along the hard dirt at the mouth of the small cave. Below the sinking sun the Siskiyou mountains ran across the horizon. Majestic mountains once made green by conifers, weeping spruce, black oaks, and coastal redwoods were now covered with what remained of the dead trees.

Nothing lived anymore. No plants. No birds. No life of any sort. Not anywhere he looked. Sadness wrapped its fist around Jon's heart and gave it a violent squeeze as he sat within the shelter of an abandoned makeshift cave. Silently, solitarily, he wept.

The bright sun's radiating heat entered the mouth of the cave and caressed the exposed skin on Jon's arm. He took a step back, deeper into the cave, when a gargled breath made him look back. Gary and Clarence were sound asleep on the hard earth. It seemed nothing kept those two awake, not even the heat.

Jon considered trying to get some sleep again, but he ushered the thought away. His mind would not quiet down enough to let him slumber. It retaliated and wandered off and came back with ugly images of dead bodies—mounds of them. Fingers of thoughts poked, rummaged, and probed the events of the last week, and knotted them with what he'd seen in the triage center: The San Diego girl with third- and fourth-degree burns paced in the background of his thoughts. The old couple from Yreka that died in each other's arms. That poor woman. Jon could see that her legs had caused her a lot of pain before she died. And Patti, left isolated with her two boys. His thoughts kept going back to wondering what would have happened to her and her boys if they hadn't stumbled into them. Would they have starved to death? It eased his conscience to know they were to join Lazador's Nest.

Jon's mind was on autopilot and wouldn't quiet. No, it looped around and drove over the death paved roads, and through the dark desolate cities that would be forever memorialized in his mind.

In the cave, sheltering from the sun's deathly touch, Jon realized something he hadn't realized before: the future did not have to be what Zarant decided to make it! Hearing about Gary and Clarence and their world with vertical gardens and classrooms, it meant there was an alternative that SunSafe residents needed to be made aware of.

Suddenly, Jon understood why Zarant and the multinationals cared about autonomous, thriving communities—competition and dilution of power through choice.

They followed the route Melinda and Jose, the two deceased Yreka Marines, had mapped during their debriefing. They had trekked 78.2 miles in two nights, in rough terrain. Gary, Clarence, and Jon were on night four. To increase the pace, Jon, who had a propensity for pausing to ponder, and to wander off to inspect something without saying a word, was placed between the two experienced military men. Anytime he paused or slowed, he felt a firm finger poke him between the shoulder blades, prodding him on.

At one point, Gary grew so frustrated with Jon that he offered to Transport him to Lazador's Nest. Curious about this *Nest* of theirs, Jon readily accepted; however, once Clarence described the Transport process, Jon politely declined their offer to be Transported anywhere. His declination was firmly solidified after Gary casually admitted he'd only used the technology three times: to and from the SF SunSafe to meet General Garret. And the once, to get Jon out of the SF SunSafe.

As soon as Jon's brain acknowledged he'd already Transported, a blast of panic shot through him. The idea of his body having been broken down to the core building blocks of the most basic matter, and then sent off like bits of data over some frequency! He nearly passed out at the realization of it all, and vowed that he would never permit his body to go through it again.

Jon swore to himself that he would get back to the SF SunSafe walking if he had to, so long as he did not have to Transport. However, it wouldn't be a bad idea to get home soon and bathe. He scratched an itch on his head and decided he could also do with a haircut.

Access to water governed the frequency with which they bathed, which meant that they hadn't bathed since they left that lovely abandoned home in Yreka.

"Clear skies," Jon said with relief. He had to pause to look up without tripping and immediately felt Clarence's finger poke him.

Another storm had passed through that afternoon. The wind had howled so mightily that Jon made his way as far into the cave as possible.

"Got to keep up," Clarence said. Gary was a good six paces ahead of them. "You realize he's thirty-plus years older than you." Clarence guessed that Jon was in his early twenties but not older than twenty-five.

Jon could not seem to help himself. His senses had gone haywire since he had been out of the SF SunSafe. Everything pulled on his sensory strings. Every dry-rot-eaten tree needed to be touched. Every rock had to be held and rolled in his hands. And the mountains, with their sporadic peaks and troughs, begged to be admired.

"I had a clairvoyant episode this morning, Clarence." There was some sarcasm in Jon's voice, but only a little. "Thus, I have decided that I must stop and smell the proverbial roses."

Clarence smiled and shook his head. Jon was a bit too young to hang around for long, but he liked the kid alright.

"Oh, pray tell, what have you seen?"

Brushing off the smart response, Jon proceeded to share his earlier view of the future. "A bifurcated world, where people leave the SF SunSafe's West Side to join communities like yours. And..., well, the SF SunSafe's East Side."

Clarence stumbled and looked ahead, but said nothing. Gary was right. Jon could never be allowed to go back to the SF SunSafe. He knew too much about Lazador.

"Dammit!" Gary swore and triggered a forced reset of the conversation taking place behind him.

They had fallen quite a bit behind, but they heard every expletive that left Gary's lips.

"What is it?" Clarence placed an arm on Jon to keep him where he was, and approached Gary.

"It looks like that bit of our trail was sheared off by a landslide." It was too dark to see how far the drop was. Gary looked right, then left, then chose to go left, towards the side with fewer peeks, hoping for better terrain.

Jon watched the way Clarence look left, then right. And just like Gary, he went in the same direction without questioning the logic. Jon wished one of them would share their thought process with him.

"I can't imagine what led Calvin and his team out here." They were in what had once been a National Park and Clarence could not see why a group of people, out scouting for other living societies, would end up there.

Gary shook his head; he had already wondered the same thing. "I'm betting we would have found the answer in that house, the one they all seemed to talk about."

Both Clarence and Jon knew the house Gary meant. It was a white, colonial style home in a rural neighborhood. The home served as a mausoleum for the family of four, murdered out of desperation by the patriarch before taking his own life. When they listened to the description given, they all agreed to respect the dead and leave their resting place at peace.

A couple of hours later, near the mountain top, Clarence and Gary dropped to their bellies and crawled to the crest. Jon was out of breath and trailing. When he finally reached the top, he was breathing heavily. Clarence grinned and shook his head at him. Gary gave him an incredulous glare. Embarrassed, Jon busied himself with fishing his binoculars out of the thirty-pound pack he had labored to carry up the mountainside. As he brought them to his eyes, he realized that Gary and Clarence were not using any.

"Let me guess, you also have night vision binoculars built into your neurochips?" Something had changed with Gary and Clarence. Suddenly, they had become much more forthcoming about their Nest.

"Of course, we do," Clarence replied, as if he had asked a ridiculous question. He was about to say more, but he froze. His eyes moved from left to right, then back again. Then his shoulders slumped, and he turned to Gary. "Did you get that?"

Gary nodded dejectedly, stole a glance at Jon and winced.

Jon didn't see the exchange between the other men. His eyes were darting around the large rectangular compound that sat smack in the center of the valley, searching in vain for whatever it was that Clarence referred to.

Gary rolled onto his back, and for the first time since Jon met him, he seemed vulnerable.

"Jimmy's always been a good kid," Gary said, working his jaw to release some anger. Once again, he stole a glance at Jon.

"Oh," Clarence said to himself. He saw the way Gary looked at Jon and finally received confirmation of why the kid seemed to annoy Gary so much—Jon reminded him of Jimmy. Of course. Clarence had also picked up on their similarities, which were pronounced in their build and in their behavior.

"What was Diana thinking?"

The sudden hard set of Gary's lips into a flatline, and the coldness that so suddenly seeped into his eyes, frightened Jon. All he could do was panic and hope that he had not inadvertently done something to trigger Gary's wrath.

"Gary—" Clarence choked up as his neurochip delivered Claudia's update on Jimmy's condition.

Not neurochipped, and not a Lazador Nest resident, Jon couldn't know that both of his travelling partners had just received a neurochip communication from Claudia. She pinged them with an urgent request for a video chat. Claudia's hologram wore her hair in a French braid and had her hands clasped before her. Clarence and Gary both noticed the clutched handkerchief in her right fist. It would be the bitter sweet communication they'd been expecting to receive: Jimmy died twenty-two minutes ago. Fortunately, he was no longer in the agonizing pain that had tormented him day and night.

"...we had him for a week longer than we thought we'd have him." Claudia's hologram finished the update and fell off their neurochips' vision. Claudia had tethered her neurochip to Michelle, Edward, Gary, and Clarence to solely to share the message.

Rather than allow himself to feel the heartbreak happening within him, Gary focused on their mission. "We need to move on." Rolling over, he continued with the belly crawl until they were over the crest.

Clarence nodded and followed. Inside, he struggled to swallow down the lump in his throat. Jon noticed their sudden mood change and was at a loss over the cause. Worried it might have been something he had done, he made certain not to fall behind again. At least, not until Gary lost that chilling frost in his eyes. As things were, it was clear to Jon that Gary did not like him.

Moving non-stop for another three miles, they zigzagged through piles and piles of dry-rot-eaten trees until they reached the base of the foothills. In the distance, a huge, solitary gray compound rose. It sat squarely in the middle of the vast, flat, desolate valley with unobstructed views in every direction.

“Drone!” Gary called out, as a drone lifted off of the compound’s roof. “Facemasks!”

Their sunsuits were designed to protect them from the sun’s UV rays, which were what activated the sunsuits cooling system. The Kevlar synthetic fabric also sequestered a body’s heat signature by dispersing it into the individual threads that then took that heat and dissipated it at the external temperature.

They got to within fifty yards of the compound. The structure seemed to have been recently constructed; its exterior lacked the wear and tear of the harsh elements that most other edifices bore. It was obviously uninteresting architecture by design; but what caught Gary’s and Clarence’s attention were the lack of perimeter fencing and military guards, when it was clearly a military compound. After closer examination, they spotted the inconspicuous cameras and heat-sensing lasers that were confoundingly trained inward, at the building itself.

“Look.” Gary pointed at cameras that had been mounted atop forty-foot poles, two at each of the four corners, several yards away from the actual structure. The cameras simultaneously pivoted in opposite directions, trained on covering a perfect imaginary square around the dreary compound. “They know that nothing, or anyone, would be wandering beyond the building’s perimeter,” Gary said, convinced the lasers hadn’t been installed to keep people out, but rather to keep them in.

“It’s a prison of some sort,” Clarence said, seeing what Gary saw. The remote location of the compound indicated to Clarence that the prisoners had to be hardened criminals, the SunSafe’s worse. “According to Melinda’s and Jose’s map, this is what they labeled ‘slaughterhouse’,” Clarence said, as he checked the time with his neurochip.

Intrigued, Jon remained close to Clarence and Gary, so that he could eavesdrop on their conversation. As they spoke, Jon realized that he would have been in trouble if he had been out there on his own. He would have walked right up to the compound, and would have likely been zapped to shreds by the lasers before he knew what hit him. That he wouldn't survive a day out there without Gary and Clarence was a sobering realization. He would never again fantasize about a rebel's life again.

Clarence shuffled nearer to Gary and said something about getting closer to the compound, which Gary immediately rejected. No one would be moving any closer to the compound until he could determine how Jose, Melinda, and their group had been detected.

Meanwhile, Jon used his binoculars to get a better look at the buildings. There was not much to them. A few dark, tinted windows high off the ground and no visible entry points. Other than that, there were not any signs of life.

"What do you think it's used for?" Jon whispered, holding his binoculars down and looking to Gary and Clarence for some kind of answer.

"All we know is that Melinda had been certain that it belonged to Zarant Industries. How she got that information runs along the same path as what made them come this way in the first place. We do not know."

At that moment, the lasers powered on and formed a perimeter fence in the form of a huge square. Instantly, the barn doors to doors to the largest building swung open and people began to spill out. Enormous people.

Jon saw both Clarence and Gary look at their watch to make a mental note of the time.

"Three forty-five in the morning," Clarence marked. "I'm capturing images and sending them to Michelle and Claudia for analysis."

"Right on time," Gary replied. The Yreka group left meticulous notes behind.

Jon tried not to be impressed by their neurochip capabilities, but he was. Dr. Saenz was never going to believe him, especially not the bit about them having portable Transports. Portable!

Gary nodded and twitched an eye muscle to zoom in his vision. Muscle control had been one of the most difficult skills Gary had ever had to learn. Unlike Clarence, who

was more comfortable with technology, which he chalked up to him being an engineer, it took Gary nearly three months just to be able to record what he was seeing in real life.

A slow, repulsed expression appeared on Gary's face. "Claudia, are you guys on? Are you seeing this?"

Michelle and Claudia were in Lazador's control room standing over the hologram table.

"We're getting you're feed, dad," Michelle said, business-like. The size of the people in the hologram seemed wrong.

"Oh, my God!" Claudia said, enlarging the hologram as Edward entered the room.

As soon as Edward tethered to the call, his hologram was added to Michelle's and Claudia's.

The people in the hologram were, for the most part, grossly rotund in build and somewhat lethargic. They hardly moved. Mostly, they stood still, staring off into the distance. Every so often, when someone would get too close to the laser fence, it would turn red and flash, alerting the trespasser of the countdown to electrocution.

"You don't think—," Clarence gave Jon an uncomfortable look that was bundled around a truckload of full throttle disgust, but his question was meant for Gary. "Do you think that's what Jose meant by 'grotesque cattle farm'?" He shifted his weight on his elbows and looked forward again. "I mean... they look like they've been plumped... like," the words were fighting him, "like human cattle."

Gary could not believe his eyes. That's exactly the thought that came to his mind, but there had to be another explanation. Both men involuntarily shook their heads with revulsion.

Jon understood what they meant and suddenly lost all of his color.

"Zachary would never—" Gary began, zooming in his vision a bit more. "Could that be what's in those jars you eat?" Gary did not have to turn to Jon for him to know the question was meant for him.

"N—no!" Jon vehemently shook his head as he volleyed his eyes between Clarence and Gary. It could not be! But then, a surreal thought struck him and he turned back to look at the plumped-up humans. They had to have been given growth hormones to

become that impossibly big. “I don’t think, I mean,” Jon shivered with revulsion then turned sideways and gave up his breakfast of corn mush with walnuts and a bit of honey.

The barren valley showcased the prisoners as they stood shoulder to shoulder, several thousand strong in long, knee-length, gray shirts. Their skin was so tight around their girth that it looked like it might burst if one more millimeter was asked of it.

“Could there be more of these... farms?” Jon’s revulsion was magnified by his own question. The thought of more places with disturbingly morbidly obese people, being pumped with hormones like cattle, did something to the psychology of a person who’d unwittingly cannibalized his own!

“That’s what we’re going to find out. That and how we’re going to put an end to the multinationals.” There was no more doubt or hesitation in Gary’s demeanor. He fully agreed with Clarence that the multinationals needed to be dislodged from power and destroyed.

Clarence smiled and turned to Jon. “You won’t be going back to the SunSafe.” Before he could ask, Clarence answered his question. “We’ll bring Sara in as well.”

Gary gave a distant nod. His eyes remained focused on the compound as he took a step into the Transport portal he had opened. “I need to go see Entelo. We’re going to need more resources than Lazador has at its disposal.” Gary was never more grateful for the Transport portal than at that moment. “God help me. I’m about to go and wake a sleeping giant.”

Entelo would be furious with Gary for the uninvited visit. It had to be done.

“Zachary crossed a line that should never have been crossed,” Clarence said, as he shoved Jon forward.

Jon had been preparing to run in the opposite direction from the Transport portal, when Clarence, with his shotgun reflexes, grabbed him by the collar and forced him through the pitch black, rectangular doorway.

February, 2046.

SF SunSafe. The Transport booth doors opened and a hazel-eyed, middle-aged paramedic wheeled a man on a gurney into Sara’s emergency triage center. Before she could ask her first question, he turned and pulled out a second gurney with a woman who

wore a toe tag. Dead on arrival. Like many of the patients, they were severely burned and dehydrated, and their skin had become a quilt of lesions and crimson boils oozing a bloody puss. But the most disturbing part of all was the stomach-turning stench of cooked human flesh that followed them in.

They are too young. Sara's empathy ran so deep that it felt as if a knife had been jabbed into her heart.

Ed, the Zarant paramedic that Transported them in was keying something into a wrist computer, documenting the new arrivals. "He has been mumbling, saying things I can't understand. He keeps saying Glassdome. Do you know what that is?"

Shaking her head while taking his vitals she asked, "Do they have ID?" When she pulled up his eyelids, she saw the solar rays' irreversible damage. There was no time to feel sorry for him. Cutting off his clothes, her only thought was to work on him and get him stabilized before the NRS2s took him away.

The medical ward was filled with six rows of thirty patients, each one attached to a hydration drip. None of the patients were SunSafe residents. SF SunSafe residents had their own hospital inside of the SunSafe. Sara's patients were refugees who somehow managed to cross the rough waters of the Bay and got into San Francisco, unaware the SF SunSafe city was impregnable from the outside. Most of the patients in the ward would die. Those that lived would never make it into the SunSafe.

Sara never knew what happened to the patients that recovered in her ward. After twenty-four hours, all patients are removed from her care and assigned to an NRS2. After that, Sara lost track of them. All she knew for certain was that they never made it into the SF SunSafe.

Sara's thoughts drifted to Jon. He had been gone nearly four months and she missed him. When Steven stopped by, he'd been evasive on every point about Jon and his new home. He had, however, made it plain as day clear that there would be no means to communicate with Jon, but that he would be safe and thriving. The day after Steven visited her triage center, Sara found a note written in Jon's hand. The note explicitly warned her not to eat the *Tasty Meatloaf* food jars, or any jars with "meat" in the ingredients. The note had been placed in a bag of apples that had been mysteriously left in her triage perch. Apples!

The note had come from Jon, Sara was certain of it, so she headed its warning. Though how he managed to enter and leave it in her perch undetected remained a mystery.

Ed's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"They were found outside of the SunSafe by the ground sweepers this evening." Ed said, with his gruff voice, then released a slow whistle that expressed his wonderment at the fact that air still filled the lungs of one of the patients. "By the looks of them, they were out there at least a couple of days."

Sara's hands stopped moving and her brow furrowed. "Are they SunSafe residents?" There was always a possibility they were SunSafe residents, because Zarant Military liked to punish people by throwing them out of the SunSafe to perish under the sun's touch. She was also aware of the elderly abandonment problem.

The patients' young ages made her wonder how Jon was doing. Sara often wished she could reach out to Steven for news, but it was made clear to her that she would be contacted when it was safe to do so.

Ed grimaced and held a neurochip reader to the male's head. "Yup. SunSafe resident. Says here his name is Jason Mayor." Ed gave another wonderment whistle and continued. "He is a young one. Thirty-Two-years-old. 6'1", brown hair. Whoa!" Sara paused what she was doing and looked to Ed expectantly, waiting for him to read out whatever it was that he found surprising. "Says here his residence is Seattle SunSafe Building 82-7a and that his employer is Zygot Industries..." Ed's right eyebrow shot up signaling his cynicism. "...a subsidiary of Zarant Holdings." Ed seemed to hesitate as if rethinking what he was about to add, but continued anyway, "They were outside of the SF SunSafe, but their neurochip GPS, according to my reader, says they were in Oviedo, Spain, until this evening?" Confoundment turned his statement into a question. Zarant didn't have any entity SunSafes in Oviedo, Spain. At least, none that he was aware of.

"There must be something wrong with his GPS. Faulty, maybe?" Transport booths were only existent inside of the SunSafes, and without Transport booths, there was no Transporting.

"I guess it's possible, but it feels wrong."

"It does." Sara gave an absentminded nod and wondered out loud, "Could they be dissidents?"

Ed seemed to think about it. After a brief consideration, he rocked his head side-to-side and said, “I mean,” he scratched his head, “that would make the most sense.”

Ed received another absentminded nod from Sara. She paused for thought then said, “It explains why you’re still here.” Ed was always running off, except when something piqued his interest. He was a sniffer, or at least that’s what he had labeled himself: a person who followed the bad smell until he found the source. Ed smiled, but provided no verbal confirmation. It made no difference, she knew him all too well.

Looking for an NRS2 and seeing none, Sara shook her head. “I swear, NRS2s are always crawling all over the place, getting in your way, taking over tasks and patients while I am still working on them. But when I need one, they’re nowhere to be found.” Irritation made her face contort.

“What do you need? Maybe I can help.”

“Please. If you can wheel him just there.” She pointed to a curtained-off space that served as an examination room, the only one remaining that was properly outfitted with hospital equipment for a human doctor’s use. NRS2s had most of the equipment built into them. “Start his morphine drip. We’ll spare him pain when he wakes up.” Sara bit her bottom lip and focused on the woman who was nearly unrecognizable from the boils and tattered bits of skin that covered her. They had to have been out there longer than two days because the woman before her had been roasted alive.

“I don’t see any morphine drips anywhere.” Ed was a middle-aged man and had been in his line of work for the entirety of his working career. He had seen a lot in his lifetime; and yet, more often than not, it felt like death had somehow become more gruesome.

Like Sara, Ed was one of the few remaining human employees in his field. They both suspected they would be the last humans in their respective fields with comprehensive knowledge and actual hands-on experience.

“There has to be some.” Actually, there didn’t and she knew it. The multinationals had been decreasing her triage center’s budget, which meant that she was receiving less of everything. It was only a matter of time before they shut her down. So far, she had been able to scratch at a few of the board members’ consciences, at least enough to make them feel a little guilt, but her influence was beginning to wane, and those same board members

now avoided her like the plague. “Give me a moment.” She leaned over the woman, Nancy, and held a stethoscope to her chest.

Ed took no offense to being second-guessed. He had already declared Nancy as dead because she had no pulse, but it was Sara who had to sign the death certificate; therefore, it was her job to double-check his work.

Holding the stethoscope in place, Sara placed two fingers just above the collar of the blue nondescript jumpsuit the woman wore. Her chest neither rose nor fell, but still Sara listened.

“Her name is Nancy, also from the Seattle SunSafe.” Ed had a gray beard that was kept very trim. He was handsome, in a rugged sort of way that did not appeal much to Sara, but he had a kind heart and was very good at his job. “Co-workers,” Ed said, as he moved to stand across from Sara, so that Nancy’s motionless body lay between them.

A thrashing sound and jumbled gurgle erupted from somewhere behind Sara. When she turned, she saw that Jason was fighting against the constraints, flailing and pushing up, trying to free himself from the straps that kept him on the gurney. Ed and Sara rushed over and pinned his shoulders down.

“Sir.” Sara tried to calm him down but he seemed to need to talk.

“Stop Zachary. Stop the Glassdo—” He began convulsing and screaming. Burnt and sticky with blood and puss, he thrashed then released a harrowing scream that gave Sara goosebumps.

The pressure from Sara’s fingers against his shoulder began to slide the sun-cooked skin off his body. But she could not release him. She would not. He needed to be held in place to keep him from hurting himself further.

“He’s in shock.” Sara pulled her hands away as soon as his body went limp.

The sun had stolen away Jason’s sight when dehydration kicked in and dried up his eyeballs; they were left distorted, much like raisins. A rheumy mixture of tears and blood now marked a pathway that ran down the side of his face.

“His heart stopped,” Ed said, resigned to the morbid life he lived.

Every day Ed brought the walking dead to Sara, so that she could pronounce them dead. Somewhere along the way, before he realized it had happened, his job morphed into something odious. He rounded up the dying, sunburnt people as soon as they were spotted

outside of the sun-protected SunSafe city! It all made his conscience want to heave until his soul was purged from his body. Still, he kept on. He had to because it gave him access to people like Sara, Jon, and Fred. People who helped him cling to a little bit of faith in humanity.

The daily struggle of whether he should get out of bed was very real for Ed. He needed to know that people like Sara still fought the fight for the betterment of the human race. People like Sara gave him the strength he needed to throw the sheets back every morning, get out of bed, and *live* the misery that had become his life.

Sara hung her head. She would not resuscitate. It was forbidden.

“Eight-twenty-one p.m.” With two fingers on Jason’s wrist and a heavy heart, she called the time of his death. “Chalk up one more to the millions of meaningless deaths.” Sara said, then wondered if anyone out there would miss him. A wife? A mother? A father? Or was his death one more drop that was added to the ocean of the anonymous?

“Do you have any clue what he was trying to say?” Ed asked, wondering whether he had heard correctly.

Sara shook her head and said, “I think he said, ‘Stop Zachary. Stop the Glassdo?’”

“That’s what I heard, but what does Glassdo mean? And what is Zachary doing with it?”

Sara didn’t know, but Ed’s question made her think she should tell Steven about it. Maybe he would know something more, or perhaps his mysterious friends would.

Whomever Steven’s friends were, he refused to elaborate on them. All Steven would share with Sara was that they did not belong to a SunSafe. He wouldn’t even say how he got in touch with them. What was important was that Steven swore that his friends had resources. Significant resources.

Ed’s radio crackled to life. There was an emergency that needed him right away.

“On my way,” he said into the radio, giving Sara an apologetic tilt of the head.

“Do not worry about it, Ed. Go. I’ve got things here,” Sara said, her thoughts already back on Jon.

She wished she could talk to Jon and find out what Steven’s friends were doing with the information they gathered in Yreka. That technology should have never been developed. Steven said they suspected the genocide had something to do with Zarant, but

that was all. Not very forthcoming for someone who asked her to share any anomalous events she came across—Steven might need to learn the definition of a reciprocal relationship.

Sara jumped when a sudden movement caught her eye. A burnt hand, laden with swatches of charcoaled skin that hung off and exposed raw pink flesh reached out for her. *She is alive!* The dying woman grabbed onto Sara's lab coat with every fiber of her body, and pulled the startled doctor towards her.

Nancy's small fist shook as she used the last of her strength to keep the doctor close enough to hear her. Tears streamed down Sara's cheeks when she felt the heat from Nancy's breath touch her ear. She heard the dying woman's sorrow, but there was no trace of fear in her voice as her foaming mouth, with parched cracked lips, waited for Sara's promise.

She explained that she had a daughter at home that needed to be collected before Zachary could get to her.

Desperate for Nancy, Sara soothed her and gently patted her forehead with a cold, wet towel.

"Do not worry. I will keep her safe," Sarah wanted to give her peace. "I swear it!"

"Please! You have to stop the—" Whatever Nancy was going to say, she never got to finish. Her lips trembled as she tried to form the rest of the word. Sara helplessly watched as her sun scorched chest rose and fell one last time.

"Nancy! No! Please... please!"

Now that it was no longer needed, the NRS2 finally arrived and approached the patient. Sara snapped. "Stop!" She looked over at Jason's lifeless body, and then at Nancy's. The NRS2, accustomed to following every instruction, froze in place. "They are both dead! Leave them a moment."

Ignoring the confused NRS2, Sara let herself fall to the floor and weep.

Lazador's kitchen staff was working on dinner. Bones busied himself mincing nuts, grains, and herbs that would then be added to a rice and vegetable mix, then formed into a loaf with a wheatgerm binder. The side dish for the nut loaf would be seasoned sweet potato fries. For the beverage, a red, honey-sweetened hibiscus tea was being brewed in

two large vats. Canoe paddles were used to stir the mixture. At 5'3", Gracie had to stand on an overturned bucket and lean precariously over the vats as she alternately stirred the refreshing elixir.

"Bones," Ronan ran into the kitchen, right up to Bones who was elbow deep in the sticky nut mixture. "Do you have any more of those sweets?" Contrary to his fears, Bones hadn't lost weight from his conversion to veganism. Instead, he seemed to fill in, in a healthy way. Those once sunken areas between his bones had filled in and evened out, giving him a more solid appearance.

Five other loaf makers stood around the same rectangular stainless-steel table as they worked on molding the lumps of nut mix into loaves. They each grinned to themselves. It wasn't the first time a kid came running into the kitchen seeking out the candy thief—Bones. Ronan, however, was different from the other kids. There was a mature sense about him, and it came with an innocent bend that touched the soul. It was also endearing that he wasn't a cute kid by traditional standards, he was cute in an odd sense: his mouth was too big for his face. Also, he had ears that sat like handles on an amphora vase.

Guapo gave Bones a disapproving headshake.

Bones ignored Guapo as he looked into Ronan's little face and asked him, "Who told you?"

"Beatrice is going to kill you," a dark-haired young woman said, with a mirthful disapproval that seasoned her tone.

Hesitating, Ronan eyed the beautiful woman and made took of her warning. Next, he turned his eyes back to Bones and assessed the situation. He replied with a shrug and said, "I overheard a conversation." He was a good little soldier, refusing to throw his source under the bus. Claudia had done him a favor by telling him; he wouldn't betray her confidence, particularly not when the benefits of being in her favor were so delicious.

Bones smiled. "You're a clever little man, aren't you?"

Proud of himself, Ronan stood erect and placed his little hands on his hips. His lips spread and lifted at the corners. Those around the table grinned. "Martina says I am too clever," he gloated.

"She would know," Guapo laughed. Martina was a small package of intensity. Anyone would be forgiven for thinking her older than her twelve years of age.

It wasn't supposed to be funny that Bones regularly snuck into the sugar pantry and helped himself, but it was.

Reaching into his pocket, Bones said, "I have two sweets left. I'll give you one, but no one can know about it, especially not Beatrice."

If Bones would have looked up, he would have seen Guapo's head shake again with outright disapproval.

Ronan kept his eyes on Bones and ignored Guapo. "I won't say a word to anyone," Ronan wholeheartedly swore.

Bones had no doubt that Beatrice would never hear about the missing candy from Ronan. The last time Beatrice caught Bones sneaking honey ginger sweets out of the pantry, she chased him out with a broom and threatened him with a stark warning, "If I ever catch you in my pantry again, I'll pour a jar of honey into your hair while you sleep! That will teach you a lesson!" Bones knew Beatrice well enough to know that she would follow through.

Bones took a bee wax wrapped hard candy from his hand and pressed it into Ronan's little hand. "Okay, now run along, or you'll not have dinner tonight."

Seventeen

November 12, 2045.

The moonless night reached into Diana's soul and took a firm hold of it, strangling out a deep-rooted melancholy that washed over her like an ice-cold waterfall. *Jimmy, where are you?*

The feeling of going airborne pulled her eyes forward. Her gut felt as though it had taken a plunge off a cliff. With a hard impact, the motorcycle landed back on the ground and swerved around a swimming pool-sized gash in the ground, that sent a chill down her calcified spine.

"Sorry!" Fred, her rescuer, driver, and Zarrant guard said, as he felt around his waist to make sure her hands were still wrapped around him. Fragile and small, he struggled to sense whether Diana was still sitting behind him without physically checking. His gloved hand grabbed ahold of her interlocked fingers at his waist, and checked her grip. As soon as he felt the hardened knots that were her frail hands, he said a silent thank you. "You doin' okay, Miss Diana?" He could not believe that he had a woman her age riding behind him on a motorcycle. Worried that her bones might fracture from the friction, he worked hard to avoid the potholes.

A motorcycle had to be used in order to circumvent debris and obstacles that plagued the abandoned streets of the East Bay, and beyond. And to avoid the bodies, so many bodies. There were also the rumors of wild populations, those redlined by Zarrant Industries for being undesirables. They had been rumored to roam, loot, and murder in order to survive. Diana tried to explain that most were gone, either dead or keeping to themselves, but Fred did not want to risk it. At the end of the day, eluding an enemy would be made easier if they were on a motorcycle.

“I am,” she lied, as the front tire, then the back tire, of the motorcycle dipped into a large divot, sending a painfilled shockwave through her body. The pain went ricocheting through her nervous system, making her clench her teeth until it passed. Compounding the pain was the hopelessness that clung to her like a wet blanket. As soon as they arrived at Lazador’s Nest, she would tell Gary everything so that they could send a search party for Jimmy.

Jimmy, please be okay!

Fred said that she had been in that cell for nearly three weeks. Three weeks! Worry had filled every minute of every day. Jimmy, sweet and naïve Jimmy. Every waking minute, Diana had worried about Jimmy. About whether he was still alive? Whether he had food and water? Whether he stayed out of the sun? She hoped he somehow managed to tether his neurochip to the Nest and save himself.

If only she could recall the facial muscle and mental combination to tether her own neurochip to Lazador. Gary was going to be furious with her. It was possible that he would never forgive her. She was not sure she would ever forgive herself if anything happened to Jimmy.

Lazador’s first-generation neurochips had been programmed to accept combinations of facial muscle twitches and mental thoughts as commands, until a user mastered the use of thought to command. For example, recording one’s vision required one right and two left eyeblinks. It was the easiest most straight forward combination and, the only one Diana knew. She and Jimmy hadn’t worn the neurochip long enough to memorize some of the more intricate combinations. *I pray that I haven’t cost that boy his life.*

While lost in the experience of the city lights and towering buildings, she managed to lose Jimmy and to get herself arrested!

Diana kept her mind busy with worry over Jimmy. She wondered where he’d gone off to. She had searched for him inside the holding cells, amongst the scraggly men, women, and children—she still couldn’t believe the emaciated state of the prisoners—and had yet to find him. Of course, it was absolutely possible that there were more holding cells on other floors, and that Jimmy was in one of those. But Fred insisted that he wasn’t in the SunSafe cells. He swore that he thoroughly searched for anyone matching Jimmy’s

description, but not one fit the bill. Red hair would have been a dead giveaway in a sea of blond, black, and brown hair.

The holding cells were located in the lower floors of the SunSafe. Windowless, the only light she received was from bright white lights that never shut off. It smelled of something awful in there, but the prisoners didn't seem bothered by it, as if they'd become accustomed or immune to the stench. There was also a constant clack of military boots against the tiled floor that ensured no one slept for long. Some of the guards regarded the prisoners with sympathetic looks, but most regarded them with hostility.

According to the guards from the morning shift, after sitting in the cell for what she would later be told had been three weeks, she was to be Transported to some compound in Oregon. While they cued her up and readied her to step into the transport booth, a riot broke out and an all-hands-on deck alarm went out to every guard. Suddenly, she was being turned around and hurried back to her cell. Next thing she knew, Fred was sneaking her out of the building and into the very street that she had been arrested on.

Once again, the motorcycle went airborne and whiplashed Diana back to the present. She felt the motorcycle's lift in her aching muscles and fought against the burn in her joints. As she clung to her middle-aged driver, they plunked back down onto the hard earth. Without a word, he continued to maneuver the motorcycle through the obstacle course that had once been the thriving city of Dublin.

She's got to be in her nineties! Fred thought to himself, marveling at how well she was doing given the circumstances. He glanced at his left-hand side mirror, but couldn't see her face. She was keeping herself pressed against his back, just as he'd asked her to do, both for aerodynamics and to shield her from flying debris that suddenly kicked up.

In the darkness, the only vestiges of past human life were the silhouettes of buildings, junked cars, and other durable goods, all left behind for Mother Nature to gnaw on and gradually corrode away.

As the motorcycle bounced, tilted one way then swung to the other, Diana wondered how Fred had attained such a keen sense of direction in what amounted to chaos. The streets were buried by years of windstorms and neglect. Street and highway signs were missing or impossible to see in the darkness. Abandoned cars clogged nearly every road. As far as she was concerned, navigating through the abandoned communities was like

finding your way through the Amazon without your bearings. Thank goodness he had night vision goggles! Diana could not see her own hand if she extended it before her.

Feeling a sudden attachment to Fred, she raised her head to look at him, and instead gasped when she saw the dark shapes that appeared in their path, materializing as if from nowhere. Fred swerved out of the way, just in the nick of time. They came so close to a collapsed building that she felt her right arm lightly scrape against the debris.

Burying her face into Fred's back, Diana breathed heavily and mentally worked to control her nerves. Turning her head to the left, she kept her cheek pressed against his back. From there, she watched the dark silhouettes of the structures as they flashed past. It reminded Diana of her childhood, when she'd fan the pages of a book to animate the dot she'd drawn. Just like the book, the structures' outline ran besides them, moving up, then down, flatlining, peaking, depending on the structure and what remained standing. Some silhouettes appeared to be complete, many were tilted or partially collapsed, while some appeared to have collapsed all together.

"Hang on!" Fred hollered over his shoulder, just as he leaned into the wind and they picked up speed.

Ignoring the pain, Diana shut her eyes and clung to him as tight as possible.

The motorcycle swung severely left, then abruptly right. A thousand tiny teeth gnawed on her diseased joints, but she fought against the pain. She fought to focus on something positive, like the memory of Jimmy's goofy smile, when she heard the distinct sound of air displacement. Her eyes shot open in time to see the blur of a small building passing only inches from the tip of her nose. Unexpectedly, she felt Fred's elbows drop and tighten around her arms, securing her grip on him as they skidded into a sharp right turn.

She was about to ask him why they were suddenly going so fast, but when he worriedly chanced a glance behind them, she knew the answer.

"Tell me," she cried out, unsure if her voice would carry over the motorcycles guttural groan.

"Two of them!" He yelled back, raising his body enough so that his knees could act as shock absorbers. "I'm sorry, but I need you to just hang on as tight as possible and try not to shift your weight too much."

Diana wanted to look back and see what he saw, but her calcified body would not permit further rotation of her neck.

The distinct sound of two engines rolled up behind them and her heart sunk.

“We can’t lead them to the Nest,” Diana warned, not realizing that her driver, Fred, had no idea where Lazador’s Nest was. His job was to get to a certain location in Madera, where Steven had arranged for a Lazador contingent to meet them. Fred still had no idea what would happen to him or his family, who were still inside of the SunSafe. His heart was in a knot. “Do you think you can lose the—” Before she could finish the question, the motorcycle began to weave and wind its way through the debris at white-knuckling speeds.

“Try not to panic,” her younger, but not too young, driver hollered back at her, already extending his left knee outward for balance.

The motorcycle leaned into a severe left turn. Diana felt the sudden weight shift and pressed herself into Fred’s back, wanting to make sure her weight shifted with his. With her last few wisps of strength, she squeezed her grip around his waist, closed her eyes, and sucked in a panicked breath as her driver’s knee lightly nicked the ground.

From the sound of their engines Diana knew their pursuers were still on their heels, and that they were gaining ground.

Fred had hoped to take a somewhat leisurely road trip out to Madera, deliver the package, and scavenge a few artifacts to sell in the underground market before heading back. He’d picked up a tail once or twice before, but they had fallen off on their own and hadn’t pursued.

In Fred’s all-out effort to elude their pursuers, he weaved through backyards of neglected homes and drove over fallen fences and through dirt yards. On occasion he’d had to drive through half-destroyed homes. As they sped through one yard and then another in the darkness of the night, Fred noticed a much darker rectangle in the path ahead. Without warning, he lifted and bent his knees like a recoiled spring, then maneuvered the motorcycle onto a haphazard ramp made of a debris pile that launched them into the air. They landed with a hard thud on the other side of the half-buried swimming pool.

One of the pursuing motorcycles, the one to Diana's left side, made the jump behind them, but the other didn't. A crashing sound of metal followed by an explosion rose up from behind. Diana felt a temporary sense of relief. By now, every joint in her body had become a burning flame. Each time the motorcycle's tires sank into divots and potholes debilitating shocks of pain ran through her nervous system. Electric currents shot over the delicate threads of the spider web that was her nervous system and converged at her joints.

Diana forced her body to twist just a little bit more to try and catch a glimpse of their pursuer, but the pain was too much to bear.

Gritting her teeth, Diana bit back the pain as the motorcycle swung right, then left, and she felt her body scream as the pain forced tears from her tear ducts.

A graveyard of cars lay before them. Diana shut her eyes and felt the distorted breeze whiff by as they drove between the rusted, tireless cars.

"You need to trust me here," Fred called back to her. "Hang on to me as tightly as you can."

That was a big ask, but Fred had no choice. He sped them forward and without warning, he spun them around, grabbed a metal pole off a concrete block, and harpooned their pursuer in the chest, but not before the Zarant Military guard pursuing them shot off a nerve-neutralizer.

Fred ducked and jerked the motorcycle around to continue on, but when he felt around his waist, Diana's clasped hands were no longer there. A heartbreaking glance back showed her on the ground. A pool of blood had blossomed around her head and ran over the broken concrete hunk her head rested on.

"No!" Fred cried.

Eighteen

April 7, 2046.

The five most powerful individuals of the global economy sat around a conference table in the One Building. It wasn't long ago that they changed the fortune of entire nations by supplying and withholding their products and jobs. They weaponized their market dominance and aggregate wealth in order to bend—even break—global governments. They used the same tools used by the wealthy and powerful from the beginning of time, only this time there was only one conqueror: Zachary Kendall.

Zachary's icy blue eyes travelled from one CEO to the next. Devon, the handsome, boyish CEO of Zalt Industries, which held the monopoly on natural resources, was to his immediate right. Devon fidgeted in his seat, avoiding Zachary's eyes as they lingered over him before they mercifully moved on. Avi, the convivial CEO of Matabomb, which held the monopoly on engineering, infrastructure, and telecommunications, was to Devon's right. Unlike Devon, however, Avi smiled and gave a customary polite nod of acknowledgement, which Zachary summarily ignored. Zachary's attention moved onto Cristina, the poised CEO of Abya Solvent, which held the monopoly on banking and finance, and was the sole issuer of the virtual currency that the SunSafes run on—VIC: Virtual International Currency. The sight of her caused Zachary's lips to become a tenuous flat line. Unlike her male counterparts, Cristina returned Zachary's glare with one that held as much, if not more, contempt.

Neither Cristina nor Zachary blinked until Kevin, a pugnacious type with close-set blue eyes and a sharp nose, the CEO of Soul-Bio, coughed and drew Zachary's attention from Cristina to himself. Kevin was seated to the left of Cristina.

As CEO of Zarant Industries, Zachary's avarice dominated as his strongest quality. A fifty-one percent interest in each of the aforementioned conglomerates made him the wealthiest and most powerful man in the world. His bloated wealth and power only fed his narcissism, his second most dominant quality.

"Gentlemen," Zachary began, completely disregarding the lone female at the table.

Maintaining her stoicism, Cristina sat back and grinned inwardly, satisfied as the blood vessels along Zachary's temples tensed. Everyone knew that the man was a narcissistic chauvinist that lived for a reaction, and none were better at depriving him of one than Cristina. Avi was directly across from her, which made it difficult for her to miss the ever so slight nod of approval he sent her way. Devon happened to be new to the circle of CEOs, and strongly disapproved of his uncle Zachary's behavior, which was why he aimed an empathetic smile at Cristina. She saw it and instantly worried that Zachary was going to chew him up and spit him out.

"Lebanon has gone Dark." The bluntness of Zachary's words sucked the oxygen out of the room. Everyone, including Cristina, reacted. Shock and disapproval seemed to be the response that strung them together.

Shock, disapproval, and... confusion. "Dark?" Devon asked, his eyes travelled around the table, but none dared to look his way because he'd spoken out of turn.

Zachary had, on several occasions, cast people out of the SunSafe for interrupting him.

Kevin cleared his throat and placed his right elbow on the table and waived his left hand in the air. It was his way of asking for permission to speak.

Cristina cringed at Kevin's blatant deference to Zachary.

Zachary made a preemptory gesture and Kevin leaned back, like a dog that laid back to show his submission. Devon's eyes ping-ponged back and forth as he noted that his uncle behaved as though he weren't there at all.

Cristina and the others around the table made note of Devon's complete dismissal by Zachary.

Zachary continued, "At last count, there were five hundred thousand living there, give or take a few thousand." The misanthropist in Zachary revealed itself once more. Zachary used to hide this side of himself, but as the population shrank, as he hoarded more and more of the wealth and power, there was less need to. What he despised most about the

human race was its affinity for an individual's right to exercise his or her free will. He didn't think most knew what to do with that privilege.

Avi shifted in his seat, disquieted by the Dark-Out and by Zachary's disturbing behavior as he reported the death of half a million people. He spoke as though it were nothing more than a basic mathematical equation—five hundred thousand minus five hundred thousand equals zero. Zero remaining Lebanese.

"The population rejected the mandatory neurochip implants and had the gall to demand monthly welfare stipends of food and water." The four CEOs flanking him sat up, waiting to hear more, but Zachary seemed to be done.

Everyone in the room, except for Devon, the twenty-nine-year-old CEO of Zalt, had experienced prior Dark-Outs—Azerbaijan being the most recent.

Avi, Matabomb's CEO, felt his stomach knot as he digested the meaning of Zachary's words. Like his counterparts, he sat erect and as still as a statue. The blood drained from his brown face.

His conscience got the better of him and Avi blurted, "I don't understand... we were in agreement." He looked around the table. Devon and Cristina looked at him, but Kevin had become captivated by his fingernails. "As we automated the SunSafes, we agreed that we would provide food and water stipends. It is not welfare, it's a necessity." Avi did not understand why they couldn't just stick to the plan.

As soon as he'd done it, he wasn't sure why he'd spoken. Sure, he was a CEO of one of the five remaining global multinationals, but like the other CEOs at the table, he wielded no actual power. All of the power monopolized by the multinationals was wielded from the seat at the head of the table, the seat Zachary Kendall occupied.

Zachary looked as though he were about to spew fire at Avi.

Kevin cringed and casually leaned back as far as his chair would allow. Cristina's eyes shot to the door, expecting a Zarant Military guard to come in and sweep Avi away, just as had happened with Zalt's last CEO, Wilhem. After challenging Zachary during a meeting, he disappeared without a trace.

Confused, Devon followed their gazes. Why would a SunSafe go Dark? What did Dark mean? Had he misunderstood the conversation? It is like that Oregon conversation he overheard. What was in Oregon? Why were Kevin and Avi so anxious about it?

The conference room doors suddenly swung open and a tall, slender, self-possessed man with short dark hair entered the room. The suit he wore hugged his muscular, well-defined form. It took effort from Cristina to keep from ogling the young man, even though he was old enough to be her son.

“Pardon me, Zachary. You said to interrupt you when Khan arrived,” Izaiah said, directly.

Kahn had replaced Garret as Zarent’s Military General after Garret had “disappeared”.

Izaiah’s interruption distracted Zachary, just as he prepared to drill down on Avi. Hesitating, he gestured for Izaiah to let Kahn in. He would deal with Avi later.

Without waiting for permission, Kahn exploded into the room and instantly filled the empty space with his overabundant volume of testosterone. As he walked past Izaiah, who had to move aside to make room for Kahn and his ego, he paused and held him with a menacing glare. Kahn felt no love for Izaiah. In fact, he loathed him and made no effort to hide it.

Not being the type who needed to pound his chest in the presence of other males, Izaiah smirked, brushed off Kahn’s arrogance and left the room.

The instant Kahn entered, Zachary seemed to forget about Avi, and Avi let out a visible sigh of relief. Those around the table also breathed more easily now that Avi had been given an unexpected reprieve.

As soon as the doors shut behind Izaiah, Zachary spoke, “Kahn will take over from here.” Without another word, Zachary took his seat at the head of the table. For an uncomfortable minute, he stared at Avi with a look that promised he would be dealt with later.

Visible relief washed over Avi; he would be spared—for now.

Taking the reins, Kahn puffed his chiseled chest out and alternately glared at the CEOs through green kryptonite eyes. Sunshine colored hair gave prominence to Kahn’s large forehead and the perpetual scowl that resides on it. At thirty-four years of age, Kahn was always immaculately kept and physically fit. Most considered him to be good looking at first glance. However, a more scrutinized inspection of his character revealed hints of a sinister side, a side that only a woman’s innate intuition picks up on and sends her into a flight or fight response.

Cristina's fight response kicked in the minute Kahn's testosterone wafted into the room.

"Good morning," Kahn started, tracing Cristina's curves with his eyes.

At fifty-two, Cristina, a Mexican native, was an extremely attractive woman. Intelligent and self-assured, she became the CEO of Abaya Solvent after her father's death. She also had the misfortune of sitting right next to where Kahn stood, which made her his obvious target.

The sudden awareness that Kahn's eyes were slithering up her legs made Cristina's skin crawl.

"Move it along, Kahn," Devon warned, forgetting that he held no power over Kahn.

Cristina's discomfort produced a slight grin from Kahn as he spoke. "As I'm sure Zachary has informed you, Lebanon has gone Dark." Puffing his chest out a bit further, he added, "Your first question should be 'what is the fallout?'"

Avi's eyes wanted to roll to the back of his head from the arrogance of the man, but he wouldn't dare let them. If Kahn even caught a glimpse of his annoyance, Kahn would trounce on him and humiliate him before his colleagues. The way he looked at Cristina had already made clear that Kahn was in a *special* mood. No need for Avi to make himself a target.

Kevin cleared his throat as if he wanted to speak, but when Kahn looked at him, he shook his head and begged off. Kahn smirked inwardly at the cowardice of the supposed powerful people in the room. Not one dared to look him in the eyes. Fumbling fools.

"We showed Lebanon mercy and pulled the plug before the economy tipped further."

"You call that mercy?" Devon did not seem as confused as he had been a few minutes earlier. Before he could say more, Zachary harpooned him into silence with a pointed glare, then nodded for Kahn to continue.

"Absolutely, it was mercy. A confirmed economic collapse of that magnitude, those people were starving and they were angry about it. Protesting every waking minute!" Kahn shook his head. No one loathed protestors more than he did, he was certain of it. "We are already seeing an explosion in the number of protests condemning the multinationals. In Seattle, in Denver, Shanghai, Mexico City, you name the SunSafe and

I'll name a rebel group that is working from within to build a coalition against you!" Kahn licked his bottom lip. He was clearly enjoying watching the CEOs squirm in their seats.

"The Lebanese SunSafe and its population were doomed the day Zarant privatized their military. Pat yourselves on the back. Zarant succeeded where others failed." Kahn was performing for an audience of one—Zachary. "Gradually, with Zachary's guidance, Zarant clawed its way into control, acquisition by acquisition, merger by merger, until it became the most powerful entity in Lebanon. By the end, Zarant had become far more powerful than the Lebanese Government." The chain of events Kahn detailed were already familiar to each and every one of them. "As the climate deteriorated and Lebanon's crop economy was destroyed, Zachary... smartly...leveraged the Lebanese SunSafe food shortage to further solidify his grasp on power. Now that you all own everything, there's no reason to prolong their suffering." Kahn seemed to genuinely approve of the Dark-Out.

Cristina bit her tongue to keep her eyes from rolling. Kahn's nose could not go any deeper into Zachary's backside, could it?

When all was said and done, Zarant's investors had a seventy-three percent gain on their investment and Lebanon had a forty-two percent unemployment rate, and climbing. It had immediately plunged into bankruptcy. One year later, and they had now gone Dark-Out.

"We are still bringing countries into the SunSafe fold. So, we cannot afford... *YOU* cannot afford word of this getting out." There was not a shred of actual regret or sadness in his tone. "Lebanon must be contained. The genocide is buried beneath the guise of an extremely contagious viral disease."

Kahn's underhanded reminder, that they were accomplices to yet another SunSafe gone Dark Out, wasn't lost on them. The hooks that kept them from turning on Zachary and his evils had just been shoved in a little deeper. Their loyalty was secure, as well as their discretion. They knew that the point of no return was too far back to return to. Besides, Zachary's threat to publicize their crimes and then have Zarant Military turn them loose amongst the population to be savagely ripped apart, that was a threat to fear.

Enjoying the moment, watching them snivel and shift in their seats, as they looked for comfort where it did not exist, Kahn decided to turn the knife a tad more. "Your mandate

asked me to step in and erase the problems General Garret had allowed to fester.” Cristina bit hard on her lower lip at the mention of Garret’s name. Kahn continued swaggering about the room. He stopped and placed his hands at the edge of the conference room table, and eyed Avi until it seemed he would slide off his seat to hide under the table. “And, in case it’s not already clear to you, the problem was the bankrupt population of the Lebanese SunSafe community.”

Cristina’s heart felt as though it had momentarily experienced a seismic episode. Willful blindness. They were all guilty of willful blindness for personal gain.

Devon spoke up again, braving his uncle’s wrath. “Weren’t there other options? There are other nations approaching a similar economic flatline, other SunSafes! Look at Shanghai! We cannot just erase them all!”

Zachary’s expression seemed to suggest they could, and would, without hesitation. In fact, he knew a fun little fact that he kept close to his vest: all SunSafes, with the exception of the SF SunSafe, would soon go Dark. Their populations would be purged. Once *his* Glassdome was ready, the SF SunSafe would follow suit. Any unaccounted-for people living in those rumored underground communities would shortly after run out of oxygen, leaving only his Glassdome utopian society, with its algorithm-selected, neurochipped population to repopulate the Earth.

It would be Zachary’s ultimate triumph. His personal utopia, and he would be its God.

Kevin, Soul Bio’s CEO, read Cristina’s body language and cut her off before she could speak out of turn and get herself into trouble. Zachary may have grown outwardly impatient with her, but *he* hadn’t. He was still working on a way to climb into her bed. She was playing hardball, which only made her more appealing.

“Cristina,” Kevin whispered as a warning under his breath. She brushed him off. Her conscience was too heavy with guilt.

“Is it too much to consider another way?” She looked around the table at her counterparts, but none seemed to pick up on her call for a show of support. Realizing that she had waded into deep water without a lifejacket, Cristina took a step back and said, “All I’m saying is that every time a SunSafe goes Dark, we risk exposure. If someone Transports out before the deed is done, we will have the full wrath of the people—everywhere!”

If ever the SF SunSafe's West Side residents joined forces with an armed, and well established, outside community, it could bring about the end of Zachary's rule; this was the very logic used by Zachary to aggressively identify, make contact, and purge external communities. For *his* best interest, potential future competing communities could never be permitted to exist.

Cristina seemed to suddenly realize that she had lost the psychological mettle to cope with the population purges Zachary was instituting.

A condescending smile laced Kahn's lips. Cristina was normally a spitfire, but he smelled her new found weakness—it turned him on. He decided he would pile on. “Cristina, what did you think would happen? The country was already hanging on by a string. Lebanon's Dark Out lays at *your* feet.” In effect, he piled the lives of the half a million dead on their collective conscience, but he kept his attention on Cristina. “You all severed the delicate string that held it all together.” He smiled as his eyes settled over Cristina's cleavage.

It took every bit of self-control to stay herself. All she wanted to do was lunge at Kahn, grab him by his groin, and apply pressure until he fell onto his knees. She wanted to hear him plead for her forgiveness. Kahn would do right to remember that she hadn't been the one who stripped Lebanon's economy of its worth. Zachary had. It is not as if Zachary ever consulted her before bankrupting a country. Everyone around the table had agreed that enough was enough. Everyone except for Zachary, and he held all the power. Zarent Military answered only to him.

A few days before his disappearance, General Garret had confided to Cristina that Zachary was not going to stop until he owned everything, down to the breaths people drew. Cristina had no clue what he had meant by that, but the way he said it had left her shaken. At the time she had brushed it off as a joke, but now that she knew that he had been trying to warn her.

Kahn took great pleasure in his ability to emotionally manipulate such a powerful woman as Cristina. It turned him on, and he began to imagine himself prying her legs open and forcing himself on her right then and there. Avi noticed that Kahn had become aroused and was appalled, but like the others, he kept quiet lest he too attract the belligerent man's ire.

Kahn's eyes slithered over Cristina's breasts and onto her ample cleavage. Feeling violated, she placed both hands on the table and rose indignantly, ready to gouge his eyes out.

"That's enough!" Zachary declared.

Cristina froze, debating her next move. Kevin placed a hand on her arm and encouraged her to take her seat again.

"There was nothing left for those people. They had no resources to make them a desirable investment. Worse, they were too proud a people for their own good," Kevin said, his attempt to calm Cristina backfired. He had infuriated her further. "The day-to-day situation there was pretty dire. Frankly, I'm not surprised by the Dark Out, and I don't see how anyone around the table could be, either. The writing had been on the wall for months."

Dark Outs, engineered viruses, redlining, what other atrocities could they possibly commit in the name of greed! Cristina no longer wanted to know.

"This is not the time to grow a conscience, Cristina. It is much too late for that," Avi whispered as a friendly reminder to tread carefully.

Avi and Cristina spent ample hours discussing their situation in private. Their final assessment had been that they had to play along; at least they sat in a seat of power as they did so. The alternative would leave them with the same guilty conscience, but in one of Zachary's dungeons, or put outside for the sun to consume. What they told themselves was that if they did not do it, someone else would. Nothing would stop merely because they opposed it. At least they gained from it.

"If we had left Zianod there instead of merging it with Zarant, could they have survived?" Devon stepped right into the muck.

Devon was young, but he understood the problem much better than Zachary gave him credit for. Zachary tipped the Lebanese economy so that the multinationals didn't have to pay the annual stipends to support the population. The "string" Kahn had referred to was Zianod. The Lebanese SunSafe's primary employer, Zianod, had a throwback CEO, Elias, who refused to automate and outsource jobs. He was also a vocal opponent of Zarant, sounding alarms and inspiring rebellions against Zarant Industries and its CEO, Zachary Kendall.

After nearly a year of fruitless efforts by Zarant and its shareholders to buy Zionod, it fell victim to a hostile takeover, launched by its largest shareholder, Zachary, who then proceeded to break it apart and mechanize or eliminate roles that required human labor. After that, the economy had no lifeline remaining. It spun into total collapse. As for Elias, no one knows what happened to him, though they suspect his body is lying somewhere outside of the Lebanese SunSafe, seared by the sun to an unrecognizable state.

As far as Zachary was concerned, Lebanon going Dark had been necessary for him to fulfill his fiduciary responsibility to his investors. He ran an efficient ship, every entity he acquired was reorganized and restructured to capture maximum profit. Whether it was done through automation or outsourcing was irrelevant; multinationals have never been beholden, or loyal, to any one country. It is an impossible ask! Without a global consumer base, multinationals would never earn the revenues required to earn the record quarterly profits their investors demand. Zarant Industries was, and always would be, a multinational conglomerate beholden only to its investors and their profitability. Zachary would see to that.

“Your question is irrelevant! We acquired Zianod legally. Keeping their operations intact was simply not a profitable option.” Everyone’s eyes were on Zachary, who seemed to be trying to murder his nephew with his stare. “Besides, this is a courtesy notice, that’s all. It is not subject to debate. All Transport booths have been taken offline and all forms of communication have been severed. A mysterious, highly contagious Super-Flu virus hit the Lebanese SunSafe community fourteen days ago,” Zachary paused for a moment to observe each of his useless, fidgety CEOs. Their sudden pallor only reinforced his belief that they were all disposable, but not until after he was safely inside the Glassdome. “It’s done, so deal with it.”

Sullen, Avi seemed to sink in his seat.

“Are we at least making sure there are no survivors?” Cristina’s hand was shaking as she reached for her water glass. Her throat was as dry as the parched earth outside of the SunSafe community, causing her words to stumble out as a hoarse whisper. “We can’t have what happened with Azerbaijan happen again.”

Like Lebanon, Azerbaijan had self-imploded. Months into the SunSafe migration, the Azerbaijani Government had leased out the rights to their natural resources and managed

to extract a minimum inflation adjusted income stream for their people, paid by the multinationals. It was stipulated that the stipend was to be paid so long as the resources flowed.

During his power building years, Zachary bought into Soul-Bio, Azerbaijan's flagship company. Like a poison that gets into the bloodstream and slowly poisons a body, Zarant Industries began monopolizing Azerbaijan's economy. Both the Government and the people saw it happening but never protested. Zarant brought cheap—both in cost and quality—products into their market, making everything accessible to everyone. The tradeoff was that they lost good jobs in the process.

It was during this time that Zachary decided the terms of the royalty contract were overly generous and tried to renegotiate them with the Azerbaijani Government. They would not budge. They could not. By then, the unemployment rate was exceptionally high and their people had become reliant on the royalties received from their country's natural resources. Zachary saw the royalties as taking money from his left pocket and putting it in his right pocket. Azerbaijanis were buying his goods with his own money. He felt jilted.

Without justification, the royalties from Zarant stopped and Azerbaijan fast became insolvent. All of Zarant's products, including food products, sat on the shelves. No one could buy them. Desperate, their government threatened to expose Zachary's default, who was still drawing from their natural resources. In retaliation, Zachary isolated the country and starved the population. After all, he held the monopoly in their market place.

Unfortunately for Zachary and the other CEOs, their involvement in the country's collapse would not stay buried for long. Months later, a handful of Azerbaijanis who had prepared for the event and survived, created a devastating PR nightmare for the multinationals.

One beleaguered, yet determined, Azerbaijani survivor managed to hack into the global SunSafe media distribution arm used for propaganda by Zarant. From there, she broadcasted a narration of her peoples' genocide, down to the gory details. "Our people starved to death. Men, women, and children, an entire culture of people just wiped off the face of the earth. And for what?! PROFITS!" The hologram of a withered woman was projected into the lobby of every SunSafe on the planet. The depth of the horrors she had witnessed could be heard in her voice, and seen in her haunted eyes. It wasn't long after

that Zarant Military had to be ushered into the global SunSafes to control the rioting masses.

Many died that day, and many more disappeared. By the end of it, the people's fighting spirit had been broken.

Cristina shivered at the memory of the snaking lines of naked journalists forced to parade their nakedness outside of the SunSafes, until they collapsed and their bodies shriveled beneath the sun's hot breath.

An over confident Kahn strutted around the conference room table and pressed a button on the wall. A hologram appeared in the center of the table with two Zarant Military personnel in hazmat suits. They were roaming the walkways of the Lebanese SunSafe. The image projected for the CEOs was that of a third soldier whose neurochip was tethered to Zarant's network.

One by one, the CEOs tethered their own neurochips to the network in order to allow their senses to simulate the environment in the hologram. Instantly, their nostrils were filled with the smell of sewage and death. To Kahn's chagrin, Devon bolted out of his seat and retched in the trash bin. Avi and Cristina were just as bothered by the stench, but they managed to maintain their dignity and quietly untether their neurochips from the feed—the visual would be sufficiently disturbing on its own.

The scene was gory. Bodies with encrusted, mucus-encased eyes, noses, and mouths were strewn where they fell. Empty food jars and other trash heavily littered the floor. Sewage continued to seep out of doorways and into walkways, forcing the soldiers to zigzag and walk single file to avoid it.

Signs of desperation were everywhere one looked: carved into walls, written in blood, or simply deduced by the sheer number of bodies with slashed wrists. Lebanon's residents died a slow, miserable death. Corpses, big and small, lined the length of the Skywalks and underground malls. Child-sized bodies with bloated and distended bellies were plentiful.

"As you can see, we did them a favor. They were clearly starving to death." Only Zachary seemed to accept Kahn's absolution, but he did not care. As far as he was concerned, those seated around him were benefiting from Zachary's genius, and *he*, Kahn, was merely doing his job—a job he found inspiring.

Cristina averted her eyes from the hologram. Somedays she felt guilt's sting more than others. Today, guilt threatened to eat her alive.

"The plot was masterful. All we had to do was contaminate the water, and well, you see the results!" Kahn boasted, enthralled at the single stroke masterpiece created.

"Oh!" The soldier's shock called everyone's attention back to the hologram. "There are thousands of bodies scattered out there, as far as the eye can see."

Cristina winced when she realized the moguls covering the desert landscape were sun scorched human bodies.

As the soldiers continued their inspection through the various high-rises and Skywalks, looking for survivors, they inventoried the dead. Avi had to look away when, in what must have been a nursery, a newborn baby lay latched to her mother's breast. It was apparent from the condition of the bodies that the mother died days before her newborn. The baby had probably survived only a short time after the milk had run out. A lump formed in Cristina's throat as she visualized the newborn sucking in vain until her last breath was taken.

"My men will scour the community from top to bottom to ensure no one has survived." The soldier panned out. "One side note. I'm not sure if you can see it or not, but it seems as though some severe storms have taken place here, much worse than the stuff we have had back home." Close to a quarter of the northeast section of the Lebanese SunSafe community was gone. Also, the glass that protected the Skywalks was heavily scratched and fogged. "Apart from Godzilla, the only thing we can attribute this to is an unprecedented sandstorm or tornado. I mean, look over there, the thing left a crater!"

The image was unsettling. Scattered in the distance were mangled chunks of concrete and rebar that had been meant to reinforce the buildings against severe windstorms.

"That building would still be intact if it's frame had been built with undiluted steel," Avi whispered to Devon, who was seated across the table from him.

Avi's behavior was risky, so Cristina took initiative and kneed his leg with hers to shut him up. Zachary cut corners on everything for profit, Devon already knew that. Why Avi would put his neck on the line for Zachary's nephew!

It was accepted knowledge by everyone around the table that residential buildings constructed in the least desirable sections of the global SunSafes were constructed using

“soft”, or diluted, steel. When metal fatigue occurred, the structural integrity of a skyscraper could become compromised during severe weather.

“What about the virus? Isn’t it contagious?” Devon’s concern shifted to the soldiers and whether they would not bring the disease back with them.

Kahn smiled. Zachary really kept them in the dark. Devon’s own firm, Zalt, had developed the Super-Flu virus and the antidote. Devon’s public mortification and shock expressed to everyone there that he had no clue that either existed—until now.

“Highly contagious,” Kahn said, and then paused to take in the shocked faces around the table. “However, since *you* developed the antidote and the virus, well, it’s irrelevant.” Catching a glimpse of Zachary’s annoyed reaction, Kahn decided to back pedal, just a bit. It seemed he might have misread the situation. Zachary didn’t appear to appreciate Kahn taunting his nephew. “Right? At least, that’s how I understood it.”

As far as Kahn was concerned, Zachary was the only real CEO in the room. He knew how to make hard decisions, unlike the rest of the whimpering lot. Didn’t they realize that Zachary was handing them the planet on a silver platter? All they had to do was breath, nod, and shut up.

Kahn’s comments filtered through Devon, and a grimness that chilled him to his core took hold.

“What are you saying?” Devon’s shock was public on his face.

“Tag, you’re it,” Avi whispered to Devon, as if he were passing the baton.

“No! I do not accept this. You’re saying that the Super-Virus that killed all of those people was engineered in Zalt’s labs?” Just like that, Zachary had him. If word of Lebanon going Dark ever got out, he would be blamed for it. Not Zachary. What had his aunt Elizabeth gotten him into when she forced Zachary to name him CEO of Zalt? “You’ve implicated me and my firm in a genocide?” Looking around the table, his fellow CEOs seemed numb to his plight.

Zachary sat back in his chair, grinning at his own ingeniousness. “What? Did you think that you would be handed that seat of power, and share in the windfall of profits, without getting your hands dirty?” Scoffing, he added, “It would behoove you to realize that you have no power. I put you in that seat and I can remove you.”

Devon abruptly stood, taking everyone at the table by surprise. His chest heaved up and down with every angry breath he took. "Uncle, when you asked, I told you that I didn't mind getting my hands dirty. But this isn't getting your hands dirty! This is mass murder! It is genocide!" He moved towards Zachary, who remained in his seat, unperturbed.

There was no need for Zachary to move when his loyal pit bull would make the intercept.

Like a good lapdog, Kahn stealthily stepped into Devon's path and puffed himself up, making Devon take a step back.

"Sit down, Devon," Kahn ordered. Two uniformed men from Zarant Military came in to assist. "This meeting is not yet over." There was no doubt amongst those around the table that if Devon were anyone else's nephew, he would have been hauled away the first time his tongue slipped.

"Sack up, Devon," Kevin said, recalling the way he'd felt the first time Zachary embroiled him in one of his schemes. It had been the Oregon slaughterhouse for him. He'd had no idea what it was being used for until two years ago. It remained a bad nightmare for him. Like Devon, Zachary sprang the reality of human cattle being housed in his Oregon slaughterhouse compound, that should have been a laboratory.

"Sit down, Devon. You will get over it... we all had to." Avi gave Devon an understanding look. "The point is exactly what it looks like. Welcome to the Blackmailed Club."

Devon remained on his feet for a moment longer, glaring at Kahn, who did not even flinch. Eventually, he accepted the facts. Zachary had him right where he wanted. Reality fell on Devon like a house of bricks: Zachary, his uncle, owned everyone in that room, including him.

Nineteen

August 16, 2046.

A hot breeze ran its soothing fingers through Rangel's long brown hair and sent a tingling sensation down her spine. She had never been outside of the SF SunSafe. Euphoria coursed through her veins. Everything felt right. For the first time since Rangel could remember, she was outside of the SunSafe. In the elements. Sneaking out had been a risk, but as her teacher's unjust imprisonment recently taught her, so was doing nothing.

"Rangel!" An excited whisper pulled her attention from the star filled sky. Rangel's svelte form was lost inside of the baggy hemp overalls that had become standard attire within the SF SunSafe's West Side—the poor side.

Rangel turned and saw Kiersten walking towards her. She greeted her best friend with a smile and a hug. The touch of the night air on her exposed skin sent tingles of pleasure down Rangel's spine. Neither girl seemed to be in any hurry to be indoors again.

"This way," Kiersten said, without urgency. She led them towards the abandoned Victorian, the one selected as the designated meeting place. Since they had already broken the law, they saw no harm in pausing to admire the brightly lit skyscrapers they called home.

A sigh filled with contentment left Kiersten's full lips. Seeing the SF SunSafe from the outside, Kiersten suddenly understood why so many people wanted to come live there. From the outside, they only saw the brightly lit crystal skyscrapers that jutted upwards and punctured the night sky. They did not see the rot inside.

A few feet behind, Rangel kneeled to roll up her too-long pantlegs. Her hand inadvertently grazed the hard ground. It was much cooler than the humid night air, which made her feel hot and sticky. Humidity was a new experience for her senses, though not

one she particularly cared for. On the other hand, the feel of the hard, cool ground against her skin was nice. Feeling spontaneous, Rangel indulged her curiosity and laid on her back to enjoy the ephemeral moment: the SunSafe towers rose from the earth like glass swords. Above the city, the luminous moon hung like an elaborate jewel above the One Building.

“Rangel!” Kiersten’s brows pinched with concern as she gaped down at her friend. “Are you alright? Did you fall?”

Laughing, Rangel reached out for her hand. “Keirs, try it!”

Kiersten hesitated for a moment and then smiled. “We are so, so late... but right now I just want to be out here for as long as we can.”

“Key will not be happy with us.” Today was their first secret meeting.

Key was leader of the pack, and she was a fellow student at the soon to be defunct SF SunSafe Tech University. Her strong, opinionated personality came with a quick mind and hard shell.

“Being out here, it feels like I’m walking in a dream.” Like Kiersten, Rangel had never been outside of the SunSafe. If her father, Roberto, ever found out she’d taken such a risk, he would never let her live it down.

“A lovely dream.” Kiersten’s breath caught as she laid beside Rangel. Together they watched people as they moved inside the glass skyscrapers and Skywalks.

Rangel had to repeatedly remind herself that she couldn’t be seen by those inside of the brightly lit buildings. Staring upwards, at the dark patch between the high-rises, she wondered what the city looked like before climate change. Before the SunSafe glass city was superimposed over the existing old city. What were the people like back then as they walked amongst the Victorians and the row houses? Were they free spirited? Emboldened by the freedom of their lives and the freedom to roam? And their food, she dreamed about the food. Fresh kale salads, with roasted sweet potatoes, avocado slices, beets, nuts, and feta cheese. Her mouth watered at the idea of a freshly squeezed lemonade with a hint of mint. Mint. She has never had mint, nor beets, nor sweet potatoes. She’s had kale, but never fresh. It was soggy and came from a jar.

A nagging question came to mind. “Rangel, how did Key know that door was there?” Key, their classmate, had somehow “discovered” a secret door, which they used to sneak out of the SunSafe.

Rangel had wondered the same thing, but when she had posed the question to Key, all she said was that she had been sworn to secrecy.

“I have no idea... shhh!” Rangel held up a finger. “We better stop lollygagging and get inside. I think I hear a car engine.” They had been warned that Zarant Military patrolled the streets outside of the SunSafe in sporadic intervals.

It took them a moment to remember that the metal sheet covering the door was not nailed secure. When they got inside, Rangel stood in the darkness with her ear to the door, listening. No car. Breathing a sigh of relief, Kiersten took up the flashlight that had been left by the door for them. It was left switched on and face down, so that only the warm glow from the trapped light could be seen through the thick, plastic, red rim.

“Look at the ceiling!” The flashlight’s yellow spotlight slid over the inset ceiling.

Rangel felt herself relax when the light ran over large metal sheets that had been drilled into the walls to cover every window. Their movements would be hidden from the world outside. Rangel also noticed that the home was completely bare of furnishings, even stripped of fixtures. The cranky hardwood floors creaked and squeaked under the weight of each step, but the Victorian home’s frame, the bones that held it intact, was sound.

“Kiersten! Rangel!” Russ, a dirty-blond, Eastern European type, with a square, stout build, called to them as they entered the basement. “You are late. Roll call was already taken.” He moved out of their way and let them through, closing the door behind them. The meeting was well underway.

“... other global economies are experiencing the same fate as ours.” Key’s words were met with silent nods. “This means that when we graduate next month, we, without a doubt, and if it can be believed, will be worse off than every prior generation of the last two hundred years!” It seemed impossible that they could become that much poorer, but in fact, they would. Their family wealth, which was nearly gone, was depleting every day by basic cost of living expenses; it was a one directional flow—outward.

A bird-eyed girl with cropped red hair and a hard face waved a fist in the air. Like everyone in the room, she was there because it was difficult to swallow the fact that she

was working on obtaining an engineering degree that would most likely get her nowhere; on the other hand, the alternative was worse. Without jobs, and without the daily grind of the university, they would have had nothing to do but while away their day by loitering in the Skywalks.

Before the Great SunSafe Migration, an alternative to a floundering labor market in the United States, had been to emigrate to a country that fought off the mechanization of their economies. Eventually, those countries got tired of fighting, or they were coerced into conceding to the multinationals, so that no place remained for humans to ply their labor skills.

“We have been forced to become reliant on the multinationals and their handouts, which, by necessity, subjugates us to their whims!” Key’s firebrand energy was flowing through the crowd. Frustration and anger and desire for something better all mixed in the air. “If we don’t fight to change our situation... and actually change it, everyone but the wealthiest will continue on an accelerated spiral into abject poverty.” A reality most of those in the room, including Key and Kiersten, were already muddled in. It was only a matter of time for the rest. “And then what? With every day that passes we are a drain on their wealth. They resent us, even though they put us here!” Key paused a moment to let every word she’d spoke sink in. Then, she bellowed, “We have to take them out of power before they decide to cut more costs and make us ‘disappear’ from the SunSafe.” Many SF SunSafe residents believed this argument to be a conspiracy theory. However, every day that people lived their lives in depravity and continual decline, the theory’s conspiracy aspect became diluted and took on more credibility.

The difficult part for the members of the group was that even though the issues at stake were clear, the solutions were not easily arrived at. Many wondered what it was that they agitated for: A Welfare State? What were their alternative options? Should multinationals who have outsourced and mechanized over a certain percentage of jobs be forced to contribute a weighted percentage of their earnings, from a nation’s own consumer base, back to that SunSafe’s coffers? Should regulation be enacted that would essentially retard, and in some cases reverse, technological advances for the sake of bringing jobs back? For the sake of keeping people employed and invested in the social fabric of their country? Should the global economy be brought in under one global governing body and the

multinationals be forced to pay a flat global income tax that would be redistributed to the global population as a stipend? And, what should the onus be on the displaced and structurally unemployed working class?

In the end, it didn't seem to matter how the group looked at the situation. The ultimate outcome, in one form or another, had the global population in dire straits. Climate destruction kept the population dependent on the SunSafes, and that would never change, not unless Global Warming were somehow miraculously reversed. Dependence on the SunSafes meant dependence on the multinationals. The only solution they saw was to somehow overthrow the multinationals. Without that, there was no way forward. The issue was how to go about it? Zarant owned everything, including the military.

Multiple flashlights were laid horizontally on several of the shelves along the wall, aimed into the room, providing a din of random light. Kiersten added hers to a stack of three. Without their light, the group would be congregated in total darkness. The windowless basement was musty, but clean. Like the rest of the home, it had been left barren of furniture and fixtures of any kind. Only the doorless, beaten up metal safe Key used as a pedestal had been left behind.

"If we hope to have a future, for us and for Professor Chang, we must not only rebel, but we must succeed. We must wrestle power back from the multinationals."

It was an insurmountable mission they had tasked themselves with, but it made them feel good to at least participate. Rangel doubted anyone in the room thought they had the power to do anything; they were eleven college kids with nothing to fight with but their brains.

Nodding heads and impassioned conversation filled the room.

Their rebellious comradery was the result of happenstance. Professor Chang had engaged his students in a critical thinking experiment: a case study of Zarant Industries, its CEO, and the power structure Zachary leveraged to launch his ascent to world dominance. The most prominent component of that structure had been surprising—Senator Lila Duarte.

As the students sifted through the data, a troublesome pattern had emerged. Zachary, with the staunch political support of Senator Duarte, relied on leveraging economic and natural disasters to seize both assets and power from the people. They applied their

method globally, and it was a method tailor-made for the era of climate instability where one part or another of the world was devastated by disease, crop failures, catastrophic floods, catastrophic droughts, catastrophic—fill in the blank. Blindsiding a shock-deluged population allowed Zachary and his entities to power grab while his victims reeled from the fallout of whatever catastrophe struck them.

The year the Jakarta SunSafe was struck by a crippling cyclone that left hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced, Zarant Industries came out of the devastation with the sole contract to the newly privatized educational system. The contract made Zarant the largest private education provider in the world. Overnight, Zarant controlled the price of education, and they controlled who received it. When Mexico experienced a civil war, Zarant emerged with the exclusive military contract to keep the peace in the country, never mind that they were later found guilty of instigating and fostering the war for financial gain. Professor Chang's students also discovered that when people stood in Zachary's way, they had an uncanny way of disappearing. Media outlets lost their journalistic integrity after he acquired them. And most glaringly, politicians that did not support his vision, vanished.

Behind the scenes of every event was Lila Duarte, pulling strings, holding the proverbial gun to people's heads to gain support, even bullying, and threatening her fellow Congressmen until they passed the laws she put forth. She was the queen of coercion. Rumors and accounts in old news articles cited anonymous sources who shared tales and anecdotes that assured the reader that she could take down any giant that stood in Zachary's path.

Zachary made her a trillionaire in the process.

"Can we also talk about this goo Zarant is trying to pass as cloned meat?!" A robustly built woman with a salty face called out as she opened a small food jar and passed it around. "If any of you know anything about this, please share. I am really worried about eating this... this... whatever it is. I doubt it is edible."

Rangel noticed the repellent odor as the jar passed beneath her nose and passed it right along.

"That looks awful," a male voice said, but Rangel didn't recognize its owner.

When the jar got to Key, she sniffed it and almost wretched. Those around her were grumbling amongst themselves, discussing the stench and texture of the contents of the jar.

“It’s called Savory Meatloaf.” Sarcasm was laid thick on the word savory. Turning the jar on its head, they all watched in silence as the contents began to ooze out in one congealed blob. Once released, the clump fell three feet, until it splattered on the floor. The stench seemed to slowly lift and permeate the air until one of the men in the room took off his shirt and threw it over the gray, monotone blob to stifle the odor.

“That doesn’t... what is in that jar?” A cute, smart-looking brunette cut in.

“It’s a mystery meat,” Rangel chimed in. Her goal after graduation was to get a job with Zalt and work in their food development arm. With climate chaos, engineered food was the only viable option to feeding remaining global populations. Zalt was relying on available resources, such as the abundant amounts of algae that grew thick, like a fat layer, over large swaths of the world’s oceans. She wanted to go in there and be creative, to improve upon the progress that was being made. Admittedly, Rangel hesitated to call what was currently being passed for food, progress.

“We should stay away from food jars,” one person called out.

“And fight the mandatory neurochip implants,” another added.

Mandatory neurochip implants had been announced the prior day. The process was expected to move from one residential building to another, and would begin with the building that housed the lowest net worth residents.

While the poor outright rejected the neurochip implant mandate, the wealthier East Side neighborhoods were paying for it in order to skip the line. They viewed the neurochip as a reprieve from the gloom of living in the rat maze that was the SF SunSafe. Neurochips allowed a wearer to be mentally exported to a different reality, a reality of their choosing. The sensation was so real that the majority of neurochip-implanted residents preferred to live in their fabricated reality, rather than their actual lives. On the other hand, West Side residents had learned to distrust the multinationals. To cede control over their independent thoughts went against their survival instincts, but they hadn’t been given a choice. West Side residents would have to comply or accept eviction from the SunSafe.

“But how?” Kiersten asked. “People will be evicted from the SF SunSafe! They will have nowhere to go!”

It was an issue Kiersten had been struggling with herself. When her address was next on the list, how would she avoid the neurochip? Her only choice would be to escape from the SunSafe and get to the East Bay, where she might find others. Kiersten then wondered whether Key and Rangel would run away with her. No, Rangel had Roberto, her father, to think of. But Key might. Like her, Key had no one.

The room fell silent. No one had the answer.

Key eventually broke the silence. “We must infiltrate Zarant. If we can do that, then we can look for a way to shut down the neurochip program, or slow it down.”

Heads nodded and conversation flourished, and discussion amongst groups filled the air.

Several minutes passed until the redhead spoke up. “What if we just attack their servers?” Those around her nodded to show they liked the idea.

A group of three men beside them shook their heads assertively. Kiersten looked at them, and their apparent leader spoke up. “It would require us to tap directly into the server and install a back door. Key’s right. First, we need someone on the inside. Until then, we are helpless against them.”

Rangel nodded. She knew it to be true. Other hackers had held hackathons to penetrate Zarant’s servers, but they only succeeded in getting themselves kidnapped by Zarant Military.

“Some of us have family already working for the multinationals,” Key’s eyes settled on Rangel. She was one of the few people who knew that Rangel’s father, Roberto, was a Zalt engineer. “Perhaps we can leverage those relationships.”

Twenty

Meanwhile, in the Shanghai SunSafe, the residents had been forced to hunker down and ride out what had been the worst overnight storm to ever hit their SunSafe. At moments, it felt as if the wind had physically taken hold of the SunSafe and howled right at it, as it tugged and pulled it in different directions, trying to rip it from its very foundation. But the worst had been the rain. It had poured down from the sky and drowned the hard earth around the SunSafe. At moments there had been so much water that onlookers could be forgiven for thinking they were surrounded by a thrashing ocean.

In the Ng tower, during the worst of the storm, a mother and father had huddled around their newborn as their building walls whimpered and groaned from the stress of the storm. With sweat-soaked sleeveless jumpsuits, they kept their heads bowed and eyes shut tight and prayed out loud. Regardless of how loud they prayed, they never could drown out the shrilling wind.

Below, in the basement of the Shanghai SunSafe, in anticipation of the severe storm, all entry points to the sublevel mall had been sealed off to prevent looting; the precaution trapped the community transient population. In the aftermath, hundreds of lifeless bodies floated by, or lapped quietly against a random wall.

Most community members had taken shelter in their compact apartments, crawling into closets, bathtubs, or under beds, praying that their building was not the one that was ripped away and hurled into the abyss.

“Last night’s storm was the worst I’ve ever lived through,” Pavah spoke in a whisper, unsure if she was frazzled because of the storm, or because she just learned that Zarant Military had it out for her.

“You need to start trusting me,” it came out as a growl, but Roberto couldn’t help it. He was infuriated with her.

The multinationals were up to something and General Garret had likely stumbled onto it—there was a reason he had “disappeared”—or his partnership with Zachary had soured. After the conversation he had with Pavah over a hologram call, Roberto felt certain that Garret had confided in Pavah. Why hadn’t Garret confided in him? Roberto was antagonized by Pavah’s inability to trust him. Also, he felt betrayed and was bitter about it. All the same, he forced himself to swallow that bitterness down and move past it. His instincts told him greater problems were ahead.

Shanghai SunSafe residents had been forcibly neurochipped over the past year. Pavah said the residents began behaving erratically over the last few weeks. She strongly suspected Zarant Military had manipulated something with their neurochips.

The neurochip campaign had been aggressively instituted. Zarant Military patrolled each building and inspected every apartment, sweeping for non-neurochipped residents. Any residents who resisted or protested the implant were handcuffed, taken away, and disappeared. From what Roberto had been able to ascertain over his last couple of visits, those that held the wealth and power within the Shanghai SunSafe had been evacuated and relocated to the SF SunSafe.

Sitting in an empty coffeeshouse, Roberto and Pavah, their neurochips untethered from Zarant’s servers, spoke in whispered voices. Two beige mugs of coffee, one with a chip on the lip, and both filled with murky brown water that gave off a sulfurous odor, sat before them. Untouched.

As Zarant’s Military General, Garret secretly used his security clearance to delete certain neurochips from the databank, then untethered them from the server, but only after Zarant Military had confirmed them as having been implanted. That way, they were marked as being compliant by Zarant Military. Roberto and Pavah, as his allies, benefitted from this.

An intellectual type who doesn’t approve of her employer’s mandate, yet does her job dutifully, Pavah refused to apologize to Roberto for her lack of trust in him. Her big, almond-shaped eyes bore into Roberto’s, reflecting nothing more than caution.

"I'm grateful that you saved my life back there." She took a moment to take the measure of the man before her. He seemed nice, but was he trustworthy? "However, I've never met you before, and I don't know what you want from me." In truth, she was in a panicked state, but she wouldn't share that with the stranger before her. Garret warned her to trust no one.

Pavah knew how much was riding on her not trusting the wrong person. Mankind's future was riding on it. Garret located two of the three Artificial Respirators that Kenneth Montes had hidden. To keep them out of multinational hands he moved them to a secret location. General Garret made it gravely clear that if Zachary ever got his hands on the ARs, he would wipe out every living soul outside of the SF SunSafe's East Side. Pavah also suspected that if she shared that information with Roberto, her life would become dispensable. The information would be her leverage. If Roberto wanted to know what she knew, he would first have to get her out of the Shanghai SunSafe, and then she *might* share what she knew. First, she had to be certain she could trust him.

"So then, where is the thumb drive?"

Pavah's thoughts seemed preoccupied. She was absentmindedly pushing away the coffee mug before her, hoping to stop smelling the unpleasant odor its contents were emitting.

Roberto quietly watched her dark, slender fingers until the mug was at arm's-length. "Pavah?" It was a prod for her to say something, to respond to his question. The coffeehouse was completely empty, another indicator that the wealthy had left the Shanghai SunSafe. "Pavah. Where is the thumb drive?"

The whole of her body seemed to collapse into itself. "I left it. I panicked and ran. It is on my kitchen countertop." She could visualize the yellow memory stick sitting on her white Formica countertop, beside the dusty silk ivy in the green plastic pot. The only thing Pavah could do was hope that the encryption Garret had used to protect the information on the thumb drive was uncrackable.

Eyes shut tight and mouth taut, Roberto focused on controlling his temper. Poverty and unemployment are all that remained in the Shanghai SunSafe. People had nothing to do but linger around and wait for the days to pass. Hundreds of thousands of educated, unemployed youths were dispersed throughout every walkway, Skywalk, and lobby of

the Shanghai SunSafe, living out their unsatisfying lives. Their Government had let them down, and now they, he and Pavah, would as well. General Garret's disappearance threw two years of Roberto's work away. Now what? That thumb drive was supposed to provide answers.

As Roberto thought about his situation, he felt a momentary bout of insanity come over him. Garret should have shared the information with him! Why hadn't Garret left well enough alone? Why had he searched for and moved the ARs? If Pavah shared what she knew with him, could Roberto get to the ARs? All that information would have been on that thumb drive. What was Roberto supposed to do with the ARs? He did not even know what they looked like. All he knew was that Kenneth Montes had hidden the ARs to keep them from falling into the multinationals' hands, and that General Garret had spent the better part of the last five years trying to find them, to then take them for himself? Or had he learned information that forced him to hide them elsewhere? What Roberto did know was that the ARs had cost Garret his life, which meant that Zachary really wanted them. It also meant that Roberto had to do everything he could to keep the ARs out of Zachary's hands.

Not for the first time, Roberto found himself wishing the General had been more forthcoming about what he was doing and why. The only instruction General Garret left for Roberto was that he should contact Pavah, a Zalt engineer in the Shanghai SunSafe. From his first contact with Pavah, Roberto learned that General Garret sent her a postmortem email with a decryption key for a thumb drive he'd left in her possession. Roberto suspected the emails they received were triggered after General Garret failed to log on to his network within a certain period of time. They both received their respective emails on the same day, and at the same time.

"Pavah," Roberto was at a loss for words. "I'm sorry, but I'm finding it difficult to believe you never decrypted that thumb drive and snuck a peek at the files. Did you—" He did not need to finish the question. The demure shake of her head added to his frustration. He was getting nowhere with her.

"I don't care what you believe. I never opened it, because General Garret warned me not to open it."

"I told you that General Garret is most likely dead. He's been missing for nearly a year," Roberto said, mentally buried in his predicament and trying not to panic.

"I know what you said. Now, consider it from my perspective. I haven't spoken to General Garret since he gave me that thumb drive, which was over a year ago. Before that, we hadn't spoken in two years." Pavah shrugged and conceded, "I have no way of knowing where your loyalties lie." Pavah observed Roberto and decided that he had an intelligent gleam in his eyes, and an attractive face. Still, she had to remind herself that she knew nothing about his character. "There is something General Garret said that jarred me, which, to be honest, is why I didn't rush to decrypt that thumb drive." By the way Roberto sat up, Pavah knew she had his attention.

"What?" Roberto felt his body tense up. To unwind the tight coil that were his nerves, he massaged his right knuckle with his thumb.

"One night, while we were still in bed, he seemed sort of vulnerable." Pavah saw the surprise in Roberto's eyes. He had not known she'd been Garret's lover. Well, now he did. "When I asked him about his thoughts, he said that he'd caught a glimpse of the devil, and that he captured his image on that thumb drive. But he would not say more. The next morning, he apologized for being so cryptic and warned me that if I ever inserted that thumb drive into my computer, that Zarant Military would be flagged."

The memory of Garret in her bed unexpectedly summoned Pavah's desires and the timing couldn't have been more inappropriate. Thankfully, Roberto snapped her back to reality.

"Tell me something. Is the Shanghai SunSafe in dire straits? People seem worse off than in the SF SunSafe," Roberto said, with an edge in his voice.

The change of subject was intentional. Roberto needed to regain control of his frustration so that he could better navigate the rough waters with Pavah. He still couldn't believe that she hadn't tried to read what was on that thumb drive, especially after she received the decryption code. Then it occurred to him that perhaps that was why General Garret had trusted her over him. Then again, Garret's logic may have backfired on him. In her rush to get out of her apartment, Pavah left the thumb drive on her kitchen counter.

Pavah's attention had been suddenly captured by a woman with a mop of wiry white hair that was randomly threaded with black. Hunched and with a limp, there was a

determination about the old woman as she darted through the tightly clustered throngs of the unemployed. The mass of white hair maneuvered its way towards the opposite building. Clutching her bag tightly, her head twisted and turned as she scurried along, taking care not to get robbed. Midway across, her foot got caught in one of the many holes that added to the décor of the stained and filthy carpet, and she went down onto all fours.

Pavah gasped unexpectedly and Roberto turned in his seat to see what had provoked her, fully expecting to see Zarant Military police charging towards them. He relaxed when all he saw were young people crowding the Skywalk, and what appeared to be an elderly woman who'd tripped and was being helped to her feet by a young man. At least until she slapped his hands away while leveling him with a disapproving scowl.

Reeled in by the drama, they both watched as the defiant woman got herself to her feet. With both hands now wrapped protectively around her worn bag, she finished her harrowing journey across the Skywalk. Once on the other side, she glanced over her shoulder and sneered at the young man who had rejoined his friends, unperturbed by her rebuke.

"The Shanghai SunSafe is said to have gone to the economic tipping point because of our population's full reliance on the stipend. We have hit full unemployment," Pavah said, bringing their attention back into the empty coffeehouse. She stole a quick glance beyond the glass doors, at all of those beige jumpsuits. Only the poor remained in the Shanghai SunSafe. "But I can't imagine that the Shanghai SunSafe is the only one in this condition. Right?"

Since information on other SunSafe's was not available, the only response he could give was derived from his personal experience. "The SF SunSafe is well on its way to full unemployment as well. Until we are again able to Transport from one SunSafe to another, we won't know how the others are faring."

"Perhaps that's the point," Pavah said, after some thought.

Roberto had been able to Transport in by using a Zarant Military Transport booth, which was a prohibited practice and could get him arrested if he were caught. When he tried to Transport them out, the Transport booth wouldn't function. All outgoing Transport capabilities had been disabled.

Things did not look good from Roberto's perspective. Getting out of the Shanghai SunSafe would have to become his first priority, if only to see his daughter again. Rangel would worry.

"We really needed that thumb drive!" It was impossible to think of anything else. It was either the thumb drive, or the fact that they were stranded inside of the Shanghai SunSafe, which was a whole other concern.

The only solution Roberto could think of was to send Steven a message. Hopefully he would be able to pull some strings with someone at Zarant? After all, Zarant Military knew about Pavah, not about him. If Steven cleared the way for Roberto to return, then he might be able to bring Pavah back with him and hide her in his apartment until they sorted things out.

But how would he ever get a message to Steven. Impossible!

"I know. I am sorry. I just, I don't know you! And, well, I need to make sure you are trustworthy before I put my life on the line." There was defiance behind every word Pavah uttered, not apology.

Why had General Garret never mentioned Roberto to Pavah, or Pavah to Roberto? How was she to trust him, a stranger? Pavah had agreed to risk her life for the General because she knew he could, and would, protect her; and, because she had fallen in love with him. Roberto did not seem formidable enough protect himself.

Roberto had no response. It was done. He rubbed his face with his hands, then ran them through his thick black hair.

Her eyes met his and he could see that she too was frustrated.

"There is something else," Pavah said, wondering what good it did to voice any of it with Roberto.

"What?"

"Zarant Military is running a test. A software on the neurochips that allows them to completely control behavior."

"Completely? That is not legal." Of course, he knew that what was and wasn't considered legal depended on the multinationals and whether or not it was in their best interest. "As in when you eat, sleep... shit?"

There was a bite in his tone, which Pavah chose to ignore. “What if they’re suddenly able to excise a person’s own free will from their existence?”

Roberto had to take a moment. That was a bitter “what if” to chew on before he could answer. Then he said, “The power of the neurochip is frightening! Everyday people eat that slimy blob that gurgles out of the jar, but they don’t know it’s a slimy blob at all. The neurochip manipulates the data that the brain receives. That is insane!

“I have eaten what’s in those jars since the day they were introduced, and I have never, not once, smelled that putrid odor. Nor have I ever before noticed that it was a slimy monotone blob. It wasn’t until Garret hacked my neurochip and untethered me from the SunSafe server that I could see things for what they were. Now, I can’t even look at the stuff without throwing up.” She shook her head and asked, as if it had just occurred to her, “I mean, is that even real food we’re eating? Have we migrated from cloned meat to some synthetic substitute?” If Garret hadn’t provided her with MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) after untethering her neurochip, she would be starving to death!

A shiver followed the look of repulsion that crossed Roberto’s face. “With that much control over the neurochips, Zachary would be an unchallenged king.” Roberto did not know what was in those jars. It had been General Garret’s stark warning never to eat from them that made him avoid the food jars. Why hadn’t he given Pavah that same warning?

A bleary-eyed Pavah looked Roberto dead in the eye. “Zachary’s already a monster.”

For the first time, Roberto saw the deep dark pool of fear she waded in.

A female barista emerged from the back room to glance around at the nearly empty coffeehouse. The young employee held a deck of cards in her hands as she smiled at what she thought was a couple of lovers sitting close to each other, with their foreheads nearly touching, as they spoke in whispered voices. Satisfied that there was nothing more for her to do, she turned and went back to rejoin the other volunteer staff of eleven, who were keeping busy with a game of poker.

“Let us make a deal. If I find a way to get us out of here and into the SF SunSafe, do you promise to tell me everything you know? And I mean everything!”

Pavah didn’t need to think about his proposal. She knew her options were limited.

“First, you have to get me out of here, and then we’ll talk.” It wasn’t as though she had much of a choice. Pavah needed his help to find a way out of the Shanghai SunSafe, as much as he needed answers from her.

Just then, a group of young adults walked in. The apparent leader of the pack wore a confident smile as he strutted into the lounge and scouted the room for a table—they were nearly all empty. He wore a pair of synthetic denim jeans that were rolled up to the ankles, a plain white T-shirt, and a cloned leather jacket. The pack he ran with looked like a group of kids plucked right from the movie *West Side Story*.

Sitting back just a bit, enough to get a better look at the group, Roberto surmised them to be the entitled children of some local, minor-league politicians. Otherwise, they’d already be in the SF SunSafe with their wealthier cohorts. They were certainly of some wealth since average citizens could never afford cloned leather, and these kids had cloned leather shoes and jackets, including old-fashioned cloned leather wrist bands. In contrast, the everyday Shanghai SunSafe resident wore hemp jumpsuits.

“Don’t look up now, but trouble has just walked in. We have to get you out of here. Can you be tracked?”

Roberto tried to appear remorseful as he caressed her arm, projecting the image of an apologetic guy trying to get back into his girl’s good graces. The wannabe James Dean looked over at the apparent unhappy couple and gave Roberto a roll of the eyes, as if to say, “Women!” and proceeded to lead his group to the furthest table from them.

Pavah shook her head. “I removed my GPS.” Roberto’s eyes shot to her right wrist, but she had covered it up with a hemp strand of cloth tied tightly around it. His thumb gently rolled over it, feeling the thickness of the bandages that were wrapped around the incision.

“By yourself? You removed it by yourself?” He shuddered at the thought of her forefingers fishing around in her own flesh, looking for the small square chip. “Pavah, that was risky!”

Employee GPS chips were routinely implanted under the wrist, beneath the major ulnar artery, to discourage removal—one overzealous cut and a person could quickly bleed to death.

“It was a precaution. I knew I had to remove it.” Roberto only nodded. He knew that she was right. “I even lathered my face with that fracture cream you sent me the recipe for. Ingenious!” With a cautious glance beyond the glass doors, she said, “It had to have worked, otherwise they would have been here by now.”

“How did you know that you’d been burned?”

Tears made her dark chocolate eyes look like polished onyx. “Isman called me. He said that my name was added to the Traitor List.” The broken, melancholy smile did nothing to mask her broken heart. Robert knew Isman. They had met once, briefly. Isman was Pavah’s Zarant cybersecurity fiancé, now ex-fiancé.

It was still unclear how, but Isman had discovered Pavah’s love affair with General Garret and broke it off with her.

“It’s lucky you got warned.” Roberto had no false illusions about Zarant Military and how they treated prisoners.

Still smiling that broken smile, Pavah nodded, then took and released a deep breath. “So, what do we do now?”

He’d been trying to figure that part out all night long.

Inside the One Building, Zachary smoked a thick cigar with his back turned to the door. He was admiring the city scape of *his* SF SunSafe.

“How’s the view?” Lila’s sharp voice pierced his moment of reprieve. Zachary winced, but did not turn around to face her. “Well?” She asked, somewhat impatiently.

It seemed his moment of peace and quiet was over. Zachary closed his eyes and took a deep breath. There was too much to take care of today. Lila in his office so early in the day was a bad omen. The woman never made things easier for him, but she did manage to complicate them. Always demanding things get done according to her timeline, and as she liked them done.

Releasing an annoyed breath, Zachary said, “It’s filthy and full of beggars.” Then he turned to Lila, who, once again, had annoyingly managed to bypass his assistant. Perhaps it was time to find a replacement. One Lila had not gotten to. She’d gotten to this one faster than any of the last ones. Damn her! “I’m sorry I’m not prepared for you.” He

glanced at the lit cigar propped in his hand, with sinuous ribbons of smoke streaming from it, knowing she despised the smell. “My assistant failed to announce your visit.”

“He was about to ring you, but I forbade it,” Lila said, amused. “Poor kid, I don’t know who he’s more afraid of, you or me.”

Zachary knew what the answer to that question should be and decided in that moment that he needed a new assistant. One that would fear him more than they feared Lila. It was a tall order, but surely not impossible. He placated himself by reminding himself that it was not long before all assistants would be required to be neurochipped. Once neurochipped, his assistant wouldn’t know how to defy an order. He looked forward to that day.

“So,” he said, conveying his disapproval by tapping his cigar against the rim of the crystal ash tray, rather than snuffing it out, “don’t you think that it’s important for me to know when you’re coming? What if Elizabeth shows up?” Lila did not appreciate the sharp tone he took with her, and for once he did not care.

Lila watched him with those predator eyes of hers.

“Lila.”

“Elizabeth? Surely you can do better than that. We both know that crazy wife of yours self-medicates to the point of oblivion.” The descent to mental instability for Elizabeth had been a swift one. For those who knew Elizabeth before she married Zachary, it seemed unbelievable that she was the same woman. “From what I hear, she has not left her bedroom in nearly a year. You’ve managed to amplify her paranoia and obliterate her self-worth.”

There was no doubt in her mind that Zachary played a primary role in Elizabeth’s unravelling. Gaslighting, micro-aggressions, affairs, denials, corruption within her family’s organization. All of it together had amounted to too much for Elizabeth to handle. Of course, Zachary had known that from the beginning, which was why he kept piling it onto her plate, until she snapped. He had only wanted Elizabeth’s money and power, not Elizabeth. It seems he achieved his goal. No surprise there.

Zachary’s eyes turned a steely grey, but he didn’t respond. Great! Now she has informants amongst his household! How long has she known about Elizabeth’s condition? He’d been sure she didn’t know, since she’d never mentioned it before. What

about all of those times he lied about her being out, or running errands? Had Lila known he was lying? Had she let him go on like a fool? Anger heated his blood. He hated Lila as much as he loved her. If only he did not love her so much. To his eye, she was still the sexiest woman he'd ever met.

"I wouldn't just show up if you'd keep me in the loop, especially when we're so close!"

He puffed on his cigar and turned back to the city view, completely ignoring Lila. The world outside of the SunSafe seemed to sway from the heat, like a hula dancer moving her waist. Slowly. Sensuously. Sunlight bounced off the lead-tinted glass that protected the residents from harmful sunrays. *The ungrateful lot of them.* He was tired of their complaints. They were living off handouts and still they felt they deserved more. He could not wait to be rid of them.

One-hundred-forty-five degrees Fahrenheit was the external temperature of the SunSafe, according to the text thread that floated just above his wristband. Uninhabitable. Last night's low had been a frosty ten degrees.

"Zachary." The way she said his name sent a chill down his spine. She was daring him to continue to ignore her.

"Cognac?" He finally offered, turning back towards her as he grudgingly smothered his cigar.

"Yes."

The pencil skirt looked amazing on her. He allowed his eyes to traverse over the valleys and canyons of her body before pushing a button to summon his useless assistant.

Seconds later, the clinking sound of ice hitting crystal replaced the silence in the room. Nervous, Zachary's assistant cleared his throat as he poured. A glance at the mirror above the bar confirmed the tension in the air. Zachary remained behind his desk, arms crossed, as he leaned against the window. Lila sat poised in her seat. Her own eyes locked on Zachary.

"Tell me something, Lila. As we speak, my people are ransacking Pavah's apartment." His gaze was intense. It was as if he believed that if he stared at her long and hard enough, that she would split open and her sources would ooze out. When it didn't happen, he demanded to know, "How are you getting your information?"

It was irksome to him that his mistress had her own network of people inside of his organization, feeding her top-secret information.

Lila shrugged and nonchalantly replied, “How is irrelevant. What is relevant is whether the situation is contained.”

Zachary begged to differ. The name, or names, of the rats betraying his confidence were of paramount importance to him, but that was for another time. He would have to ferret out the names for himself. He knew that Lila would never betray her own network, not when it benefited her so much.

“We’re looking for Pavah now.” If Lila did not have spies inside of his organization, he would have lied to her and told her the problem had already been contained, and that Pavah was in custody. But Lila would inevitably get to the truth, and she never took lightly to being lied to.

A contemptuous shadow darkened the color of Lila’s brown eyes. “You lost her?!” Lila moved her cold glare from her nearly empty glass, back on to Zachary.

Although Lila tried, she did not intimidate Zachary. She aggravated him more than anything. Theirs was a love-hate relationship and a constant power struggle. One would threaten and the other would push back. They were toxic for each other. And yet, there was a tacit understanding that they needed each other. They knew that together they had achieved more than they ever could as individuals, and they had one more major goal to accomplish—to leave behind a legacy that would supersede history itself.

“She stole nothing. We have the thumb drive.” He seemed nervous, and he was. It was encrypted, so he wasn’t actually certain they had *the* thumb drive. Also, his people did not yet know whether it had been copied. All he knew for certain was that forensics was working on it.

“Well?” Lila drained her glass, unable to mentally move beyond General Garret having stumbled onto their Glassdome and plans. After all of the years of scheming, Garret came from nowhere threatening to dismantle all of their hard work. “Could there be copies?”

“No.” Zachary replied definitively, as if he actually knew that to be true.

“What if she gets away? That woman is the last person General Garret communicated with! She is how we locate those ARs to take possession of them! So, *you* need to find

out what she knows, by all means necessary!” Lila huffed. Although she would not acknowledge it, a part of her could feel their Glassdome dream slipping away. Those ARs were the key. Without them, the Glassdome’s future was in peril.

Zachary hated when Lila got all bothered. If she would back off, she would see that he had things under control. “Lila, she cannot go anywhere. All Shanghai inter-SunSafe Transport booths are offline, and the Shanghai SunSafe is at the precipice of going Dark. She is trapped there.” Annoyed, he shook his head. This was not something he wanted to be dealing with. “Pavah will be found, if we have to line everyone up and check person-by-person.”

Lila nodded and threatened, “You better be right.”

Zachary bit his tongue and swallowed his rebuke with a slug of his cognac.

Twenty-One

August 18, 2046.

Penurious, rough-hewn residents of the SF SunSafe's West Side slowed their pace to gawk. A red-haired woman pushed a square, metal side-table into the lobby of one of the most impoverished residential buildings within the SF SunSafe. Dense clusters of people swallowed up nearly every inch of the lobby and skywalks. The crowd parted like the Red Sea as she moved around, afraid to be associated with her.

It was illegal to move public furniture from its designated common area and most around her wished she would stop. Naturally, some bystanders shot her distrustful glances, and then fearfully glanced at the CCTV cameras, fearing that her behavior would draw Zarant Military to them. Still, several remained and watched with intrigue as she struggled with the heavy box object, ready to disperse at the first sight of a Zarant Military guard.

Zarant Military had become more aggressive through the years, using nerve-neutralizers and batons to subdue any "agitators," arrest them, and then make them disappear. Their tactics had shown to be extremely successful for the purpose of instilling fear and discouraging would-be protestors.

Stepping onto the small table, the red-haired woman placed herself above the crowd. Instantly, an acute, ripe odor of unwashed human bodies slapped her senses. The stank had risen to the top and was kept suspended there by the heat. Thick.

Shaking off the sensory shock to the olfactory, she widened her stance and balled her fists and said, "Enough!" The red-haired woman hollered over the crowd, startling it into total silence. Only the rustling of turning heads could be heard. Movement ceased. The focus of every person instantly centered on her.

A woman who had been doing a great job of ignoring the redhead, by focusing on braiding torn strips of random cloth into a thick carpet that would serve as her mattress, felt her body jolt. “Oh, for the sake of...” The woman made a show of gathering her things off the floor, where she’d been sitting, and stomped off, mumbling and cursing to herself. Others rushed to follow her lead and leave, but most stayed to watch the red-haired woman.

“We’ve been relegated to being nothing more than space takers!” The redhead’s frizzy, red ringlets jerked with every word. “Why? Because of *their* greed!” Her finger pointed due east, to where the One Building stood tall, stuffed with the world’s hoarded wealth. “They automated our jobs so that they could keep more of the profits! Now they complain that we do not pay our own way! Well! I say, give us back our jobs! Our resources! And our country! And then, we will gladly pay!” The chorus of grumblings and mumblings from the growing crowd rose and fell like the waves of an ocean, undulating with every statement, and becoming louder as more people agglomerated with the gathering mass. “What do we have? We have nothing! They, in their real-life game of Monopoly, they robbed us of everything! They are nothing more than a bunch of wealth hoarders!”

Building 2TweNtY, where they stood, was ground zero. The most destitute of residents resided within that tower—apartments, Skywalks, and lobbies regularly overflowed with residents. Suffering was evident in every malnourished, languishing body that took breath. They were the most embittered residents of the SF SunSafe, and had been the first to be implanted with neurochips.

“She is right! Why don’t we have access to real food?” Everyone knew that wealthier residents in the East Side, with their private vertical gardens, maintained the luxury of fresh fruits and vegetables in their diet. West Side residents had their meals derived from a seaweed and blue-green algae base. It was consumed in the form of a watered-down shake. There were also those food jars, the contents of which were too rancid to eat. Only those who were neurochipped, and dared to tether themselves to Zarant’s servers, dared to eat the mystery that comprised the stinky, gooey blob from the food jars.

For the moment, tethering to Zarant servers was not mandatory, but everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before that changed. West Side residents speculated

amongst themselves that mandatory tethering would not become law until all SF SunSafe residents were neurochipped.

The redhead, like most residents, was leery of that day's arrival.

The crowd continued to thicken, surprising the redhead. Residents dribbled in and tepidly approached her makeshift podium, gradually filling in the bits of open space that remained. There were many amongst the spectators who weren't pleased with her presence. They feared her agitations would draw Zarant Military into their neighborhood.

From her perch, she saw hundreds of skittish eyes dart between her and the various wall-mounted cameras. Some of the leery residents knew to watch the mouth of the Skywalks. They knew that Zarant Military would first arrive through there. Yet, as leery as they were, they hadn't yet scattered or rushed off.

There was a different feeling in the air that throbbed like a powerful heartbeat. The redhead felt the energy rouse her senses as it brought to life a small curl at the corners of her mouth. What she sensed was the people's raw anger that germinated from desperation and frustration—the best kind. It was the kind of anger that led to revolutions.

“Go start your revolution somewhere else!” A burly voice rose above the other voices.

Elevated, she visually skimmed the crowd, but there were too many people to identify the source. A chorus of agreement drowned out her supporters, but the fact that remained most prominent in her thoughts was that she actually had supporters.

“Let them have their real food. I am not going to risk my life for something I can't afford, anyway!” Another voice cried out, from a man who'd had enough of protests; two of his family members had already disappeared for having participated in them.

The availability of real food sold in a neighborhood had a negative correlation with the collective wealth of a high-rise. As poverty rates increased within a neighborhood, the fresh food shelves disappeared and were replaced by more food jars. Building 2TweNtY has had no real food in any of its SalesPoint dispensaries in nearly fifteen years.

The uniform scarcity of inventory in the SalesPoint dispensaries inside the West Side was merely another form of scorn from the multinationals. Every SalesPoint carried the exact same products: food jars, hemp jumpsuits, and other basic necessities. No candy bars. No fresh fruits or vegetables. No variety. It was one more way in which their existence was owned by the multinationals.

Kiersten, Key, and Rangel happened to be making their way to a coffeehouse where they could have a private chat. Rangel had some stressful, yet exciting news to share.

“Is she one of ours?” Kiersten had to raise her voice to be heard over the growing noise.

Key, Kiersten, and Rangel had intended to meet inside of a coffeehouse, which happened to be located within the lobby of the building where the impromptu protest had budded.

Rangel had planned to share some good news. Of the three of them, and from a field of tens of thousands of applicants, she had received a call back from Zarant Industries. Rangel would be moving to the second round of interviews. Administrative Assistant was not a position any of them would ever have considered, but it was the only open position. If she got hired, she would report to Devon, the newly minted CEO of Zalt, and nephew to Zachary Kendall, the most powerful man in the world.

Rangel, a café-latte, skin-colored software engineer, had been shocked that she received a call at all. Nearly every young adult in the global SunSafes had applied for that AA position. A second-round interview was an enormous undertaking, by all standards, particularly in an economy where jobs were nearly non-existent. She would never know what had differentiated her from the tens of thousands of job applicants, and she didn’t care. BOB, Zarant’s resume-sifting algorithm, had chosen her. Whether it was the result of a software glitch, or some other unexplainable circumstance, she didn’t care. She knew what a longshot it would be to get to the next phase, but if she could make it in, she knew that Key and Kiersten would be ecstatic. Rangel wasn’t yet certain how she would feel about working for the enemy—Zarant. Luckily, the odds were stacked against her and she would likely never have to worry about it.

“Not that I know of.” Key said, thinking she would remember the red-haired woman if they’d met in the past. They agreed amongst themselves that a protest was not the way to do things. “She’s going to get a lot of people killed.” Protests always resulted in innocent bystanders being swept up by Zarant Military guards.

People continued to stream into Building 2TweNtY’s lobby.

“I’m beginning to feel like we’re in a mosh pit,” Rangel said, her high spirits giving way to concern. They were in danger every minute they remained.

The crowd had thickened, but Key had yet to make a move to leave. “Hang on,” she said, standing on her tiptoes while her smoky Persian eyes took everything in. “I want to watch a moment longer, only a moment,” she added before Rangel could protest.

It had been a very long time since the girls had last seen a full lobby during a protest, owing to Zarant Military habitually making examples of agitators. The sight of arrested protestors put out of the SunSafe, naked, for all to watch as the sun baked them to death, had been enough to quash the most ardent opposition. Once again, fear proved to be an effective tool. Key found it shocking that the people remained silenced when she considered the harsh repression under which the SF SunSafe’s West Side residents lived. Misery and depravation were only the cusp of their miserable existence.

“I’m with you!” An angry voice shot out from the depths of the crowd in support of the redhead.

Key stood on her tippy toes, but she was still too short to see beyond the wall of heads before her. This time, the redhead’s eyes darted over the crowd and spotted the wafer-thin man. Like those around them, his emaciated body looked as if it had been swallowed up by his jumpsuit. It hung off him like an empty sack.

The three girls lived in the FiVe3tWo building. The five-hundred buildings—each of the buildings in the SF SunSafe was considered a distinct neighborhood—have more wealth than the two-hundred buildings, but not much more. Poverty’s tentacles would soon become wrapped around every West Side neighborhood. With time they would all become muddled in the same hopeless swamp of despair as the one- and two-hundred neighborhoods.

The first time Key brought Kiersten and Rangel to the two-hundred part of town they had been shocked. Key had wanted them to see, first-hand, the gravity of the poverty in those buildings as a glimpse of what they, and those living within the SF SunSafe’s West Side, had to look forward to. She wanted Rangel to grasp how consequential her efforts to leverage her father’s position with Zalt could be for *their* future.

“Me, too! I have had enough!” The thicker, comparatively speaking, woman had to cup her mouth to be heard over the crowd. She was being jostled by the pressing crowd as she spoke, but she held her ground and gave a hard nod with every word she spoke.

Excitement pumped into Key's veins as she searched her immediate periphery for like-minded folks. There were a lot! The man to Rangel's left, the one with sweat matting his golden hair over his thick brows, the one who had sweat stains going down the back of his loose-fitting jumpsuit, was nodding passionately, as were those huddled around him. It would have been great to see what adjacent Skywalks looked like. To know whether they were full of people wanting to join them, to commiserate.

"Why?" Someone else spoke up. Once more on her tippy toes, Key searched the crowd. Again, she was too short. The voice sounded close, though. "Look at me!" A deep, masculine voice barked at those around him. Key tried to follow the redhead's gaze as she searched the crowd for the owner of the command to "look at him". Like the redhead, Key wanted to oblige him. Frustrated, Key gave up and, as consolation, she told herself she would be taller in her next life.

Those who were able to look upon him saw a malnourished, diminished man. Skeletal in frame, he held out his arms and took a turn. There was no extra meat on his bones. No fat. He was skin and bones.

Having been given a full turn to speak, he said, "I have not had a job in five years! I have no money to feed myself, or my family! All I do is worry about how much longer I can pay our rent." Resonating fear filled his voice and heads began to nod.

When he moved his family into the SF SunSafe, they had been multimillionaires. Now, he had nothing, not even hope for the future. The whole of his remaining net worth would cover exactly ten more months of rent. Without jobs, he had no means to replenish his family's savings, which meant that in eleven months Zarant Military will dispossess his family of their flat and make them disappear.

A woman wearing a rough hemp scarf around her head, like a headband, to sop up the rivulets of sweat, shook a fist at the redhead and the short, green-eyed man to her left. "You're putting us all at risk by standing there and saying these things!"

Despite her words, there was warm recognition in the woman's voice.

"They must know each other, or she wouldn't sound so worried for the redhead," Rangel said, privately hoping the redhead would heed her friend.

Too many agitators had already been swept up by Zarant Military during protest crackdowns. Once someone was taken, they were never seen or heard from again. The

costs of agitating seemed too high a price in Rangel's mind, especially since protests had never achieved a fraction of the robust change that was needed to make a difference in their lives. As she looked at the gaunt faces around her, she internalized the fact that there *had* to be another way. A *better* way. Suddenly she understood that despite her fears, Key and Kiersten were right. It became crystal clear that the missing link to finding the most effective way to take down the multinationals was having someone working from within the enemy's belly.

"I won't risk my life for you!" A venomous croaky voice reached many ears, including Key's. "I'm out of here!" The woman threw something and began pushing her way through the crowd to the nearest Skywalk.

Several people began to follow after the woman, including Rangel and Kiersten, but Key didn't move when they tried to pull her along with them.

"What life?!" A man retorted. "You mean your misery! Because that's all we have, day in and day out!"

Arguments sprang up amongst the crowd, few of which seemed cordial, and some had become physical altercations. The redhead took a deep disappointed breath. It bothered her that they would fight amongst themselves when they all had a common enemy.

People continued to accrete to the mass of people in the lobby, pressing in on Rangel and others.

"Key, this has become unstable. It will not be long before things boil over. We need to get as far from here as possible." Rangel had seen this play out before. As soon as Zarant Military arrived—and they always arrived—total chaos would ensue and they would all be at risk of being swept up as agitators. If that happened, her father, Roberto, might never hear from her again. As it was, she was already anxious about his whereabouts. He normally called when he was going to be away long. Rangel suspected he had a new girlfriend, so she would not worry. At least not yet.

Key knew as well as Rangel that remaining there was dangerous, not just because of Zarant Military, but because the crowd could turn into an angry mob in a flash.

Breath was now being squeezed from them by the pressing of people jostling against them. "Okay. Let's go," Key said, taking Rangel and Kiersten by the hand. But leaving had become easier said than done.

“Go home before you draw Zarant Military to us!” A strained voice billowed over the crowd.

The crowd seemed to be working itself into a frenzy. Sweat continued to run down the redhead’s face as she blinked away the salty sting from her eyes. Trying to regain control of the crowd before things got out of hand, the redhead punched a fist into the air for emphasis, and she said, “Go home?! No! The way I see it, we have nothing to lose and everything to gain!”

The steaming soup of body odors was so thick in the air that it seemed to stall above the crowd like the fogbank stalls over the Golden Gate Bridge, before it gradually spills over and eventually swallows it whole.

“I get the redhead’s apartment!” An angry woman with stringy blond hair called out from the far back of the crowd.

The woman happened to be standing a couple of people away from Key. There was a younger woman just behind her who did not approve of her comment. Without pause, the younger woman gave herself license to take a whack at the blond-haired woman’s head. The victim turned and the two went at each other. A man with a child on his shoulders who saw the chaos begin to mount, moved to get out of their way, but made little to no progress. Before he knew it, he was part of the brawl.

“This is turning into a riot!” Rangel hollered over the elevated voices. Key nodded as she tried to carve a path through the sweaty press of people. “We’re in a pressure cooker!”

Key and Kiersten could not agree more. Key led the way, trying to cut through the madness, but progress had become increasingly difficult to obtain. Claustrophobia would soon become an issue for Rangel, who trailed them. Fearing separation, she held on tight to Kiersten’s hand. Up ahead, Key was pulled away by a brawling group of people.

“I feel like a fish being swept away by the current,” Kiersten called back to Rangel, who was sweating from every pore. Their jumpsuits were heavy from moisture, which they knew was not only theirs; they were swarmed by hundreds of sweaty bodies. “We need to try to get to Key,” Kiersten said, watching as Key was pulled further away from them. Kiersten and Rangel were being shoved deeper into the Skywalk, opposite Key, by a different current of people, while more and more bodies came between them.

“Key!” Rangel was trying to go back for her, but Kiersten was afraid of letting go of her hand. They tried to move toward Key together, but they kept getting shoved in the opposite direction. “Key!”

Panic-filled screams erupted, sending the crowd into a tizzy. Breathing was becoming more and more difficult because of the mounting physical pressure building up around them.

“Kiers! Key has been swept up by the crowd!” Panic seeped into Rangel.

“No!” Key tilted her head towards the other end of the Skywalk, where a stream of armed Zarant Military guards began pouring out of the Transport booth. “Rangel!” Key called out. “Kiers! Hold on to each other! Do not let go for anything!”

Rangel held tight to Kiersten’s equally sweaty hand as she tried to lead them to the edge of the crowd.

“Run!” Voices all around them cried out in a state of panic as they scrambled to reach safety.

“Zarant Military!” Fear-filled screams echoed as people shoved into each other, trying to disburse.

In the process, the speaker was knocked off the pedestal and swept away by the tide of people stampeding past her.

“Key!” Rangel screamed, as she was carried off by the current. She and Kiersten watched with fear as Key was carried off by the mob fleeing Zarant Military. “My house! Key! My house!” Rangel called out, hoping Key had heard her. “Go straight to my place!”

She wasn’t certain, but she thought she saw Key nod her understanding just as she was swallowed up by the havoc.

“We have to go back for Key!” Kiersten cried, in a full-fledged panic.

“No! We cannot. Look!” Zarant Military guards were swarming the place. “We need to get out of here. She will meet us at my place. Let’s go before we get caught in their dragnet!”

There had been plenty of risk involved, but Steven had finally discovered that General Garret was being held prisoner at some remote compound located in what used to be southern Oregon. When he relayed the information to Gary via chat, Steven had no way

of knowing that Lazador had already attempted to penetrate the compound on two separate occasions. Both attempts had been repelled by lasers that vaporized alien objects flying over the compound's airspace, including drones. Neither of the two drones Lazador sent in managed to touch down inside of the compound's perimeter before being pulverized. A rock tossed over the fence was turned into a plume of dust when the lasers aimed their rays and locked onto it.

"I disagree. It must be in response to *our* attempted incursions." Clarence shook his head and walked around the hologram table. The Argentine-Chilean Nest's military satellite was casting an image of the Oregon compound as a hologram in the center of the table. Clarence wore a tethering bracelet that allowed him to expand, rotate, and pivot the hologram with hand motions. Another Zarant drone was flying around the valley's perimeter. "The perimeter checks are more frequent now, and they're now being done at random intervals." The drones had been running on a regular schedule, until Lazador's second attempt to fly a drone into the compound. Since then, the compound's drone flyovers had become sporadic and were run more often.

Entelo wheeled his wheelchair nearer to Clarence to get a forward-facing angle of the hologram. The Oregon compound's large barn doors were wide open. It seemed like there were thousands of people standing outside, their eyes cast outward, much like zombies.

"Zarant Military must be frustrated, trying to figure out where the drones came from." Entelo said, wishing he could be there to see them explain their failure to locate the drone owners to Zachary. Lazador dispatched their drones through a Transport portal, the existence of which Zarant Military was ignorant to.

Portable Transport Technology had been designated as a top-secret weapon by Lazador and the Chilean-Argentine Nests. It was the first designation of its kind; and as a consequence, Portable Transporting had become the first technology within Lazador that was not universally accessible to all residents. Zarant Military's Dark Outs, the extermination of entire colonies of people, necessitated tight governing of such technologies. If they ever went to war with Zarant, having a secret weapon like the Portable Transport Technology would be extremely useful.

Lazador's meeting was being held in a secret military compound, deep within the Andes mountain range, within the ArChil (Argentine-Chilean) Nest. Gary's description

of the ArChil Nest had not prepared Clarence for the architectural marvel that it was. So far, he'd only seen one of the military wings, and its size alone had been twice as big as Lazador's Nest. Entelo's military vertical gardens made Lazador's look like hobby gardens. And, Entelo had also retained access to Un-Animas's satellites, which was how they were able to watch the live hologram feed of the Oregon compound. Still, nothing, nothing had astonished Clarence more than learning that the ArChil Nest had its own technologically advanced military *and* weapons. At one point during the walk-through of the ArChil Nest, Gary thought he saw tears of joy in Clarence's eyes as he went about and toured the facility, taking note of ArChil's impressive military capabilities.

"Whatever it was that General Garret took from Zarant, he must still have in his possession. Garret has been missing for nearly a year, so it begs the question of why Zarant Military is keeping him alive," Entelo said, almost certain that General Garret was being tortured.

A co-worker who worked with Steven had quietly mentioned that General Garret was still alive. His daughter was a Zarant Military officer, so Steven had cause to believe him. Unfortunately, his co-worker did not have any more details to share.

Clarence and Gary agreed with Entelo's conclusion: General Garret was likely being kept alive because he had something Zachary wanted. They just wished they knew what that something was.

"Garret should have reached out sooner," Gary said, full of frustration.

"*I* should have reached out sooner," Entelo added apologetically. He had been so set on keeping his Nest's existence hidden from the world that he'd cut himself off from everyone. Truth be told, he would still be of the same mind if Gary hadn't shown him his neurochip's feed of the East Bay and Yreka, and now the Oregon compound. "Something dangerous—" Entelo cut his own words and turned to Gary, "I need to see this Transport portal for myself. Your engineers must be brilliant!"

Gary nodded to say they were. Then he said, "Kisenya and Igor," as he walked around the hologram table. "And Garret. He is the one who sent them to me. Without Garret, I doubt we'd have the Transport technology. And without it, I doubt I would ever have seen you again. Although, you certainly didn't seem pleased when you first saw me."

Entelo let out a loud laugh and turned to Clarence to explain. “When I saw Gary’s image in my security feed, walking in the valley, directly below my Nest, I thought it was a ghost from the past.” He then wheeled around to face Gary. “In my wildest dreams I couldn’t imagine how you traveled here. That Portable Transport Technology is a game changer.”

Entelo spoke the words, but Gary could see that his friend retained strong reservations about his Nest interacting with the above ground world. Gary understood Entelo’s strong intuition to avoid all activities that might alert Zarant Military to the ArChil Nest’s existence. He shared them. Fortunately, like Gary, Entelo understood that Zarant’s behavior required their cooperation.

“Well, it’s a good thing that you are paranoid and have cameras all over that valley. I couldn’t remember where your Nest’s door was. All vestiges of your dig have disappeared.”

“You weren’t looking in the right place for the door,” Entelo replied with a sly grin.

“There!” Clarence spoke suddenly and cut off their reminiscing. Clarence pointed to a segment of the perimeter fence that penned in the prisoners. “We would likely have to hack a doorway through that fence to enter the compound. It is the only way. The sensors only target alien airborne objects. The fence takes care of the rest.”

Gary nodded and stroked his stubbled chin. “Clarence is right.”

They should all wear sunsuits as a precaution, Entelo insisted.

Sunsuits were designed to protect the skin from the sun’s most dangerous rays, and from the harshest winds during a tempestuous sandstorm.

Both the neurochip and the Portable Transport Technology were examples of Lazador’s engineering prowess, which Entelo made note of. Neurochips gave the wearer a “Swiss Army knife” of gadgets, such as enhanced vision, night vision, neuro-communication capabilities, and a whole gambit of other tools, each activated using thought and a combination of facial muscle movements.

“Claudia is being implanted with the neurochip today, latest would be tomorrow,” Gary shared the latest Lazador communication he’d received from Michelle. Then he added, “We should discuss timelines.”

“We should,” Entelo agreed, deciding that Chase should also be implanted with Lazador’s second-generation neurochip. When Gary first offered to neurochip Chase, Entelo hadn’t been comfortable with the idea of a nanochip being implanted into his son’s hippocampus. Now, he saw the need.

Unlike the first-generation neurochips, Claudia’s second-generation neurochip would have the Portable Transport Technology built into it, amongst other technological perks. Thought was all that was required to summon a portal, a six-foot by three-foot rectangular doorway projected from a ring worn on the right pinky finger.

“Are you sure your team can carve out that digital doorway in that digital fence?” Entelo asked, not fully convinced they could pull off such a mission.

Clarence had no doubt. Their probe of the compound’s security system discovered a flaw in the program that could be exploited to carve out a temporary gap in the digital fence, without setting off alarms.

“Entelo, Clarence has some very capable people—” Gary came to Clarence’s defense, but Clarence cut him off and defended himself.

“Entelo, I won’t say it will be a walk in the park, but we are more than capable of getting our part done.”

If Entelo was going to risk exposing the existence of the Argentine-Chilean Nest, he wanted to know that it wasn’t going to be done in vain. “Alright. Then it will be up to us to ensure that your efforts do not go to waste.” Entelo and his ArChil Nest would be putting well-armed boots on the ground and providing satellite backup.

Gary and Clarence locked eyes, both relieved to have Entelo and his resources on their side.

Twenty-Two

Mid-August, 2046.

Diana's neurochip feed was being viewed on Lazador's Command Center hologram table. Only an occasional tear-jerked snuffle cut through the heavy silence.

"In there!" A gruff military guard commanded, as he unlocked and opened the wrought iron door to a Zarant prison cell. The guard had a barrel chest, a square jaw, and a nose that resembled an eggplant. Handsome would not be a word that entered a person's thoughts upon seeing him.

Hardened by his job, the military guard pulled the door open and moved out of the way, so that two small, yet muscular, guards could enter. Between them, the guards carried an unconscious man by his arms and legs. They stopped at the door of the crowded cell, and in almost cartoonish fashion, they swung their burden back and forth for propulsion before releasing him. Frazzled, cell occupants quickly scattered out of the way, leaving barely enough clearing for the body to land on.

A woman whimpered loudly when the man's shoe caught her chin. Without further protest, she curled herself into a tight little ball and put as much room between herself and the unconscious man as possible. Her whimper and some shuffling away were the sole reactions from the prisoners—a smattering of destitute men, women, and children. The prisoners were crammed together inside of the fifteen-foot by fifteen-foot jail cell. Diana had been amongst them for several days and had become accustomed to the ripe smells of her fellow cellmates. Although she could no longer tell, she was certain that she too contributed to the ripeness in the air.

Diana sensed that she had been held much longer than even Fred had anticipated, and that it worried him. Why? Fred would not say. What worried Diana was that Fred had

stopped coming around a few days ago, after he said he had to go and figure something out, but wouldn't even hint as to what it was that had him so preoccupied.

The unconscious man sprawled on the ground made a grunting sound, but just as quickly, he fell back into a state of unconsciousness.

A shoeless woman with hard and calloused soles, thick like leather, poked him with her hard toe before skedaddling back. Bedraggled faces eyed the man with what appeared to be a loathing fear. Their eyes darted between Diana and the unconscious man, but when Diana tried to engage them, they pulled their frightened stares away. She managed to catch the eye of a young girl who had a green strip of crusted mucus on her upper lip. Without a word, the girl's mother protectively embraced her daughter as the girl's father scooched his way between her and Diana.

Diana had been there for far too many days. During those days, no one had spoken and no one had dared to stand up and stretch their legs. Often over the last several days, she found herself wondering how they did it? How they remained seated for days on end, rising only when they had to relieve themselves?

Burning aches and pains coursed through Diana's old bones, and seemed to be colliding and exploding at every joint. Unlike her cellmates, she had to stretch her legs.

A long, pain-filled groan that gurgled in the unconscious man's throat made Diana scoot towards him. Except for his chest, which rose and fell in a peaceful fashion, he didn't move. Severe bruising and swelling of his face rendered him completely unrecognizable, but there was a strand of familiarity about him. Swollen shut, his left eye had a caked layer of crusted blood and yellow puss. Bloodied fissures and puss-filled splits had reconfigured his lips until they resembled charred sausages that had burst open. But the ghastliest detail was the deep gash that began at his hairline and ran across his forehead, clear to his left ear. He appeared to have been "Frankensteined" together.

The man had been thoroughly thrashed. But why?

Bloodied towels remained carelessly wrapped around each hand. Conscious of the man's pain, Diana carefully unwrapped the one on the left hand. The towel was blood-soaked and when she looked inside, she cringed. Every nail was missing and the right thumb, from the joint down, had been severed.

With a tilt of her head, she whispered, "We know each other, don't we." It was not a question. She couldn't shake the feeling that she should recognize him. There was some shuffling occurring around her. Her question clearly bothered the other cellmates, yet none spoke up. Ignoring them, she focused on the disfigured face. "What did you do to deserve this?" Another uncomfortable shuffle, and still no one spoke up.

If she had to give the man an age, she'd guess he was somewhere in his late forties, early fifties, but not more than that. The blood-spattered graying beard and temples certainly gave him some age. Leaning closer to his face, ignoring the pain in her back and petrified hips, she took her knotted fingers, knotted from decades of severe arthritis eating away at them, and gently lifted the man's right eyelid. His lips moved and she leaned in.

"Freeze the hologram!" Gary looked to Entelo, who nodded. Recognition gleamed in his chocolate brown eyes.

"Dad, what is it?" Claudia walked around the conference room table to stand beside him, to see the hologram from his perspective: Diana was sitting on the ground, leaning over the man, holding an eyelid open. "Do you know him?"

"General Garret... Zarant Military General," Gary said, recalling that it had been Garret, before he joined Zarant Military, who referred Diana to the Nest. Without Garret, Lazador would not have the medicinal plants, nor the knowledge, that she brought to them. Neither would they have the Portable Transport technology. At the very least, Gary, and the whole of Lazador, owed Garret their efforts to try and rescue him.

"Steven had been fairly certain that General Garret was being kept alive. Now we have the proof. According to Fred," Gary looked around the room to make certain everyone knew who Fred was: The guard who arrested Diana and then risked everything to try and return her to Lazador. "Everyone in the cell was being Transported by Transport booth to the Oregon slaughterhouse." Gary paused to look at Clarence and said, "Our Oregon slaughterhouse mission is now foremost a General Garret rescue operation."

A pallor suddenly snuck in beneath Claudia's honey-colored complexion. Michelle moved to her sister's side and shared her confusion. They never had the opportunity to meet General Garret. They only knew that he communicated with their father via text message.

“Wait... what?!” That was big news! “We’re rescuing the Zarant Military General?”

“Dad, I’m with Claudia, he’s—”

“Michelle... Claudia, not now.” The explanation would have to wait for another time. It was not that simple with Garret.

Entelo nodded. “General Garret has always been an enigma. I have not spoken to him since our people went off-grid.”

It hadn’t been as long for Gary, but long enough. “We hadn’t spoken in a few years, not since Kisenya and Igor.” The last time General Garret reached out to Gary, Lazador gained two Russian engineers and their Transport technology.

“How do you know him?” Claudia asked her father.

“Before the SunSafe Migration, Garret had been a military liaison with the FBI.” An ache caused Gary to roll his neck, but it relieved nothing.

“So then—”

“Claudia, not now.”

“Dad.” Claudia’s right eyebrow rose in that very way Gary had grown to recognize as petulant stubbornness.

“Michelle, play the feed.”

“Gary.” Entelo gave him a nod, but Gary shook his head as if to say, not now.

“Dad. I am not a child.”

“Not now, Claudia.” With a sideways glance, he added, “Later.”

Claudia knew capitulation when she saw it. With his cadence, he committed to sharing all details with her. “Okay,” she said, backing off for now.

Michelle watched the exchange and decided she’d let Claudia fish for the information, then she would get it from her. “Playing the feed,” Michelle said, pressing play on the holographic keyboard that followed her around.

The feed picked up as Diana leaned over General Garret, trying to hear what he said.

“Hey! Back away or you will be next.” A miscreant, golden-haired Zarant Military guard was tapping his baton against the wrought iron door. A malevolent sneer bent his lips.

After seeing the determination on the guard’s face—as if looking for an excuse to beat her—Diana placed her deformed knuckles on the cool concrete and proceeded to drag

herself backwards, until she felt someone's shoe against her back. She could feel the others' eyes on her back, as they parted to make room for her. They didn't seem to care that they were suddenly smashed up against each other, against other unwashed bodies. They only wanted to get as far away from Diana as they could get.

Pleased with himself after intimidating a crippled old lady, the guard smirked and moved along.

The persistent sense of familiarity kept tugging at Diana's conscience, drawing her eyes towards the inanimate body with the pulped face, hoping something would click.

Minutes later, the sound of fast, pounding boots on the hard, concrete floor caused more shuffling and whimpering amongst the prisoners. A siren's wail filled the air. It wasn't long before rushing military guards in full riot gear were running by. Unsure why she felt compelled to do so, she tried to catch the eye of just one military guard as they jetted by, but none would spare a glance in her direction.

A full fifteen minutes of the wailing siren passed before silence settled in again.

"What's happening?" There were not any guards anywhere in sight, surely someone would reply to her question. "Speak! There is no one to hear you!"

Blank looks were exchanged amongst her fellow cellmates. No one spoke. None had spoken to her. Not once. Neither had they spoken amongst themselves since her arrival. They either stared at her, or off at a wall, regardless of her efforts to coax words out of them.

A brown-skinned, dark-haired man made a whimpering sound. Diana thought she saw him strain his head down the hallway, but she couldn't see what he was looking at from her angle. If she were younger, and if she hadn't been on the floor for so many consecutive days, she would have made more of an effort to see what was down that windowless, concrete hallway. There were certainly no boots clomping around.

"I wish one of you would speak." Diana's nerves were working against her. The effort and energy she put into holding herself together over the last few days was unwinding itself. Fraying. "Speak!"

"They can't," said a flustered Fred, as he stood outside of the locked cell. Harried, he fished the keyring out of his pocket. He seemed ready to jump out of his skin. Everything in the SF SunSafe was secured using biometric measures, except for the prisoner cells.

They required good old-fashioned keys. “Their neurochips have been manipulated to make them... amenable.” The word amenable was colored with disgust as he spoke it; at least, that’s how Diana heard it.

“Fred!” Diana cried with joy. She worked to stand herself up, but it was much more difficult than she had imagined it would be. “What is going on? The guards—”

“I know. It may be our only opportunity, Diana. We need to get moving.” Fred had to step into the cell to help Diana move a bit faster. She had made almost no progress getting to her feet on her own.

Limping out, Diana said, “Amenable?” Not one of the prisoners stood or tried to rush out of the open cell door. Not one pleaded for help. Their eyes showed their anxiety, but they remained where they were. She couldn’t be sure, but some of them had quivering lips and panicked eyes, and almost looked as though they wanted to say something.

Edward walked into the room. He’d been busy with a new hybrid of peaches when he overheard Mildred saying they were watching Diana’s neurochip memory feed. He was relieved that Claudia had finally found her body, thanks to Fred.

It didn’t surprise Michelle that Claudia was the first-person Edward noticed in the room, nor did it surprise her that Claudia didn’t seem to notice Edward’s entrance.

But Claudia *had* noticed Edward’s entrance and she longed to feel him near her, but she’d had to become an expert at hiding her affections for Edward, for the sake of her sister.

“Edward,” Michelle said, moving to stand beside him. She could not help herself. She was in love with him.

“Michelle....” Edward saw Gary give Claudia and Clarence a sideways head tilt before they followed him out of the room. He was about to pursue them, but Michelle took hold of his arm.

Gary led them through the main door of the large octagonal room. The activity taking place around them seemed to have more madness than method, reminding Claudia of a spice bazaar from an era passed. Like worker ants, Nest members weaved, squeezed, and pushed their way across and around each other, almost climbing over one another, with

their eyes intently focused on the large handwritten signs displaying the twenty-six letters of the alphabet.

Beneath every sign sat rows of tables scattered with crates of scavenged goods from the world above—books, cans and boxes of processed foods, durable housewares, and a hoard of other things.

Claudia hadn't paid too much attention to the recent Nest activity, which was why she found the bustling energy around them so inspiring. She'd been about to comment something about it to her father, but she noticed his tight jaw and knew that he had something on his mind. It did not seem like the proper moment for the trivial. After that, they walked in silence until they were behind closed doors. Clarence and Claudia remained standing as Gary went to his desk and pecked away at his holographic keyboard.

"Take a seat and untether your neurochips from the server," Gary directed.

Claudia gave Clarence a surprised look, but he never glanced at her. Clarence simply did as he was told. Whatever Gary was about to say had to be serious. Why else would he care whether they were tethered to Lazador's server?

"Done," Clarence said.

"Done," Claudia said, ignoring the impressed look Clarence sent her way. She had only been neurochipped three days, and already she was mastering the mental skills to work it.

Leaning forward, Gary hung his head, placing his temples between his two index fingers, and applied pressure. "What I'm about to tell you cannot leave this room." That was the first time Gary had ever required a vow of secrecy from them, but he knew it was necessary.

Claudia and Clarence didn't skip a beat. They both gave a silent nod of acquiescence and waited for Gary to continue.

After taking his seat, Gary decided he would rather stand. Biting his bottom lip, he stood again and shared some new information. "Before Garret disappeared, he had also tried to reach Entelo, but as you both know, Entelo hadn't activated the two-way communication device, until *after* I Transported to the ArChil Nest. When he finally flipped it on, he received my failed attempts to reach him, and three from General Garret. Garret's transmissions allude to Zachary fusing Incrium, something about some new

world order, and the need to locate and control ownership of the Artificial Respirators. We do not know more than that, but that's enough to let us know that we cannot be passive actors."

"Fusing Incrium!" Clarence could not believe what he'd heard! "What? Is he trying to bring about the end of humanity?!"

"It is not just the Incrium fusion that worries me. It is all three of those things. New world order? Controlling the ARs? There is a lot of *wrong*, here," Claudia said, her brain too scrambled from the sudden rush of anxiety to think clearly.

"I agree. Which is why we are going to do everything in our power to locate Garret and extract him from wherever Zarant Military is keeping him. And from what we know, he is in that Oregon slaughterhouse." What they didn't know, was whether he was still alive, but Gary wasn't ready to deal with that just yet.

Gob smacked, Clarence hesitated, then said, "That's hard for me to believe. Didn't the ARs burn in the explosion?" Kenneth Montes was believed to have been killed in that explosion. Everything inside of his labs was said to have been lost, including the AR technology and the blue prints.

Pursed lips, Gary shook his head. "I know what the reports said, but General Garret's message specifically mentions the ARs. Besides, there has always been a possibility that Kenneth knew Zachary was after his technology. He certainly was paranoid about it. Maybe, just maybe, he took proactive measures and moved the Artificial Respirators from RASTRO Labs before the explosion. Also, I doubt that Zachary would be fusing Incrium if he didn't think he could get the ARs under his control." Gary was operating under the assumption that Zachary didn't yet have the ARs, but perhaps he did. It would be dangerous to give such a man so much control.

Good point. Claudia and Clarence both seemed to agree with Gary's logic.

Then, Clarence shook his head and said, "Wait, is it possible that General Garret found the ARs and hid them from Zachary?" The same question had occurred to Claudia, but Clarence asked it first. "It would explain why Garret is still alive."

"Maybe." They did not know for certain that Garret was still alive. Gary could only hope that Steven's source had given him reliable intel. "We'll have our answers after our mission, if it's successful."

The next day, hemp sacks and plastic tubs of canned goods were being piled and stacked against a wall. The mound of goods was nearly five feet tall and spanned the length of the wall. More containers were being received through a Transport portal that Guapo was guarding to keep clear for incoming items, such as the wobbly wheelbarrow that was presently being wheeled through by a gangly teenage boy with knobby knees and elbows. Heavy weight from cutlery, cups, and dishes compressed the barrow's front tire, its aged rubber showing signs of cracking. Michelle and Claudia were on the other side of the portal, taking a measure of the progress made.

A gaggle of jubilant children ran in, avoiding the cordoned off area for Transporting, and headed straight for the new piles. Their laughter and positive energy disrupted the serious work being done and injected a lighthearted moment into the air. Under the guise of helping shelve the items on the rolling wire racks, Ronan led the pack as they peeked into bags and tubs for extra special goodies. The day before, one of the young girls discovered a keg of powdered chocolate sitting beside a pile of bags. There were six sealed barrels in total. Rose and her team had discovered them at an abandoned theme park in what used to be Florida. When Bones heard Rose had scavenged the chocolate, he used the chocolate as a way to get the children involved with different projects. Brimming with anticipated pleasure, Bones warmed up a gargantuan pot of oat milk and generously infused it with the dark, delectable powder. The children had gone wild when they tasted it. The experience turned Bones into a Lazador hero. Michelle and Claudia knew what they were on the hunt for—more goodies—and looked to Rose who shook her head to let them know the kids would be disappointed.

Amongst the newly formed scavenger teams Rose formed and trained, Jon's team was the most proliferous. Their resource foraging had netted Lazador's Nest the most abundant quantity of supplies. His team scavenged and stockpiled a surplus of military MREs, oxygen tanks, technology equipment and supplies. Rose's goal of stockpiling processed foods had been the most difficult to meet. Nearly sixteen years had come and gone since the SunSafe Migration, and the world outside of the SunSafes had been picked clean by survivalist scavengers.

“Coffee!” Claudia slapped the top of a cask-sized tin with vacuum-sealed ground coffee. “Rose... I swear, dad’s going to want to marry you!”

Bent at the waist, the top half of Rose’s body was buried inside of a box she was peering into. Still, she managed to hear Claudia’s exultation and smiled. “Do not get too excited. It is old and it is coffee that had been packaged and sold to the military. I doubt it will be very good.”

“I seriously doubt that dad will know the difference anymore. He will be over the moon that you brought back real coffee. You’ll see, that’s all that’s going to matter to him,” Michelle laughed heartily and Claudia nodded.

“Then I’m glad I brought some back,” Rose whispered, embarrassed. A blush colored her cheeks and Claudia pretended not to notice. She knew Rose was crushing on her father and she found it kind of sweet. Unfortunately, she knew her dad was too aloof to notice such things.

“Rose, have you never heard dad’s lamentations over the end of his coffee supply? For a man who doesn’t like to complain, he sure complains about his stash of coffee having run out.”

Lazador Nest residents were moving around, crisscrossing the room with purpose, carrying boxes and bags, rolling away full wire racks into the adjacent room that had been turned into a large warehouse. The supply of nonperishable goods being scavenged was abundant. What they needed more of were food items, like canned and dry goods. Food was harder to come by because most abandoned food warehouses and grocery stores had been scavenged down to the bones. Rose and her teams, thanks to Lazador’s portable Transports, were now focusing on theme parks, military bases, and remote food storehouses that used to supply the big grocery chain stores.

That day’s scavenged cache was from an abandoned military base in Florida, and another in Texas. While her teams were there, both states were being walloped by bad weather. Jon said his team could have used dive gear in Florida, thanks to the hurricane that parked itself over the state, intent on dumping thousands of gallons of water wherever its shadow was cast. Texas was an ordeal all its own. Tornado after tornado kept Rose’s team away, until they finally got a break. The break didn’t last long and they had to

Transport back to Lazador for safety. All Rose could do was hope that the food warehouse they discovered was there when they returned to it.

“Honestly,” Claudia joined in on the laughter. “When you get Dad onto the subject of coffee, he actually whines about not having it. The disappearance of coffee is the greatest travesty of his life.”

Rose was smiling, enjoying the lighthearted conversation as she prepared to lift a bag full of cans out of the box.

“Hello, ladies,” Chase said, coming from nowhere and taking the bag by the ears before Rose had a chance to lift it. “I got it, Rose. Where would you like it?”

Since Chase’s introduction to Claudia and her fellow Lazador Nest members, he seemed to spend more time there than in the ArChil Nest, which was his home.

“Hey, guys,” Michelle greeted Chase and Moose with a smile. Both Rose and Michelle noticed the way Chase’s eyes searched the room until they found and settled on Claudia. Moose came in carrying three boxes stacked atop each other.

Claudia nodded her acknowledgement of Chase and moved to see what Moose was carrying. Rose did not understand why Claudia wouldn’t reciprocate Chase’s overtures. Edward was too old for her, but what was wrong with Chase? Rose thought he was handsome, intelligent, and quite easy on the eyes.

“Where do you want these?” Moose asked Rose, who had been pondering a question that she instantly decided was none of her business.

“Oh!” Rose used her fingers to brush away the loose strands of chocolate-brown hair from her face. “Thank you! Over there, please!” Rose pointed to a space behind her where other boxes were stacked.

“Claud,” Chase had given himself permission to shorten her name. “Do you have a moment?”

Moose placed the stack of boxes right where Rose wanted them. Once a burly man, Moose had trimmed down to one half his previous girth. He and Mildred had also become an item.

“Rose, good effort from you and your team! They got a lot this time,” Claudia said, in an attempt to ignore Chase’s advance.

“They did. We have a great team,” Rose, as usual, shared the credit.

“Seeds!” Edward followed Moose in carrying two crates stacked on top of each other, with an excitement on his face that reminded Michelle of Ronan’s expression when someone brought back Twinkies from a scavenge. “Rose! You found seeds!”

“I knew you’d be happy.” Bringing happiness and good health to people were baked into Rose’s character since childhood—it is why she became a doctor. Coffee for Gary and seeds for Edward and Marco. “We finally got into what used to be the U.S. Government’s seed bank.” They’d found it by accident, in an abandoned New Mexico military base. Half of the structures on the base were missing, most likely ripped away by the unending belt of tornadoes passing through the area. Trying to Transport there safely cost Lazador’s engineering team six Weeble cameras: two were Transported into existing objects and four were carried away by wind storms. “It was deep underground, and the chamber still had electricity and running water. I could not believe that it was abandoned, but it was. I gave Entelo and Gary the GPS location.”

Weeble cameras were round robotic “eyes” developed by Lazador’s engineering team. The Weeble’s purpose was to Transport to a new location and roll around, sending Lazador images and exact location mapping of the surroundings in order to confirm safe materialization space on the other side. Weebles were cheap to develop and disposable, and without them, the risk of Transporting into existing objects would be too high to make the Portable Transport Technology useful.

“How’d you know to look there?” Chase asked, genuinely curious. Only Lazador’s Nest scavenged for goods. And then only two teams, one headed by Rose and the other by Jon, and it had already been decided that scavenging would be short lived. Gary and Entelo wanted their residents to interact with the world above as little as possible.

Rose’s bright brown eyes and confident smile were aimed at Chase. “We literally stumbled into it.”

“I for one am glad you did!” Edward was extremely pleased. “If you do not mind, I’d like to catalog them myself. That way I can become intimately familiar with what we have.” Digging through the top box, Edward paused long enough to see Rose nod. “Thank you. This is very exciting.”

“I can help you?” Michelle offered. He would need help.

“All help is welcome.” Edward turned to see if Claudia would care to join them, but she had broken off into a private conversation with Chase.

Wanting privacy, Chase guided a hesitant Claudia into an adjacent room. Old-fashioned library index catalogs with brass handles were being built into a wall next to them. Rose and her team had scavenged them from the basement of the Library of Congress. Mildred was at the opposite end of the room, four feet off the ground. She was standing halfway up on a ladder. Adjacent to her, within the rows of metal shelving, were Martina, Ronan, and six other children. They had settled into a routine of placing the scavenged sleeping bags, MREs, and other goods on shelves that would be rolled into a storage room where the older children were on ladders and the younger ones worked on the lower shelves.

“I wish I could tell those children to look forward to a future under the sun. But that day will never come,” Claudia lamented. She had been above ground enough to recognize that things were getting worse, not better. More and more, sporadic devastating storms were striking. They were stronger, lasting longer, and unpredictable.

While Claudia watched the children work, Chase stole the opportunity to admire the soft angles of her face. He was deeply in love with her and could not understand why she didn’t feel the same way about him. Why was she so adamantly opposed to forming a romantic relationship with him? Whatever the reason, it had become his personal mission to discover it and find a way to win her over. He would do it, whatever it took.

“Claudia, have one dinner with me.”

Twenty-Three

White light parading as sunlight brightened the large rectangular room, giving life to blue-green, concrete-coated earthen walls. Exposed steel beams as thick as tree trunks ran along the seams of the ceiling before turning downward and plunging deep into the earth, reinforcing the underground structure. Michelle, Gary, and Edward were gathered in a no-frills conference room referred to as “Command”.

As they spoke, they faced Lazador’s Governing Computer, the subject of their meeting. The truck-sized machine sat behind a secure, tamper-proof glass wall, in a climate-controlled space. GC was designed to govern and administer Lazador’s laws without bias, based strictly on the grievance and merits of a case. The algorithm was developed by a handful of Lazador’s brightest software engineers, informed by Edward, and vetted by Michelle. It was the basis of their effort to establish and maintain unpolluted social equity within the legislative branch of their autonomous country—Lazador.

“Our society is growing, slowly, but it is growing. We are a diverse bunch of people with different ideas of what our society’s moral code should be. I’m proposing we model our laws and economic structure around Rawlsian philosophy.” Equanimity in Edward’s cadence contradicted his rigid stance. “We are both Rawlsian followers. Why are you fighting me on this?” He was pushing back on the suggestion by some anonymous residents that Lazador rule be based on Mill’s Utilitarian philosophy. The suggestion had riled him. “Gary is on board. If someone wants to live in a Utilitarian society, or... Libertarian, for that matter, then they should move to a Zarant SunSafe.”

A disbelieving gasp escaped Michelle. “You have been colluding with dad! Unacceptable!”

“Michelle—” Gary was thinking that he had bigger issues to deal with at the moment, but that’s not what he was going to say before Michelle cut him off. He had been merely preparing to deny colluding.

“No, dad. You tasked us with this. You said to make sure to take any input we received under consideration.” She turned her disapproving eyes back onto Edward, who involuntarily shrunk back. “Just because you and I feel a certain way about how things should be, we can’t just arbitrarily disregard other community members. This is a democracy, and as such, we will have a vote to select an economic and social framework.”

“Are you ready to accept something other?”

“She has a point, Edward,” Gary jumped in. “Besides, look at our population. Look at what they have lived through. What we all have lived through. I doubt anyone in here would choose life in the SunSafe over this. Not with the stories we have heard from Jon, Fred... even Rose, who came from inside and outside of the SunSafe life.” He shook his head and said, “Put it to a vote so that the legitimacy of our democracy can never be challenged.”

“But Gary—”

“Edward, have some faith in our fellow citizens. Put it to a vote.”

“I will do as you ask,” Edward acquiesced, though he did not like it at all.

“Edward,” Michelle’s long brown hair was braided into a French braid to keep it out of her face, giving her big brown eyes prominence. “I still believe that it would behoove us all to feed existing U.S. laws into the GC.” GC is what Lazador members have taken to calling their Governing Computer. Michelle was set on having a team of researchers Transport into the New York Supreme Court courthouse and have them begin the long process of scanning any intact law books and case studies into their database. She did not see the point in rediscovering the wheel. Edward disagreed.

“No. I do not like it. The laws are riddled with biases - wealth bias, racial bias, age bias. No, I stand behind my proposal that we write our own laws. We start from scratch!”

“I disagree. The laws are fine, it’s how they were interpreted and applied that was the problem,” She cut him off. “Do you realize how much time and energy your proposal will take? New laws have unforeseen consequences that need to be considered.”

“Michelle, I have said it before and I mean it. Whatever the cost in time and effort, I am committed to investing it, for the sake of our Nest and its future.”

Michelle could not argue with that.

They both pursed their lips and turned to Gary, who was standing between them. He had been trying to ignore them rather than listen to them argue. He’d come in to read the results of the recent test case scenarios that had been fed to Governing Computer, not to arbitrate for them. GC’s results were not impressive, but they were getting fairer, and the reasoning behind a trial’s outcome had significantly improved.

It had been Diana’s vision to design an incorruptible government. Gary knew that could never be achieved, given the nature of mankind. What he had not realized was how complicated nation building was. Trying to design a legal framework that eliminated the possibility of loopholes, only created more loopholes. He was thinking that it was a lot like tying a knot that kept unravelling, until he realized the silence in the room was due to them awaiting his input.

Gary looked between Michelle and Edward, shrugged and said, “Sorry, I think you both have a valid point.” Shrugging again, he added, “The only way forward is for you two to work together to find common ground.” There was no doubt in his mind that he had picked the best two people for the job. They would push and pull until they came up with a fair structure, and that’s what he had hoped for.

Lazador’s entire existence was a social experiment; each and every resident knew it. Although, none was keener to it than Gary. At this point there was no right or wrong answer, but they all knew that things could quickly change. They had to develop a government that was as close to one-hundred percent transparent as possible, and a government that legislated on behalf of the people and society at large. They envisioned a legislative process that operated on sound reasoning, accountability, and data. Algorithms developed to game out government policy could aid in producing optimal outcomes. Outcomes that legitimize Lazador’s legislative and fiscal processes, mitigating effects of inherent human behavioral corruptions. Their outcome had to have legislative soundness and equitability, as free of bias and external influence as possible. Whatever they came up with had to be sustainable through population growth; it also had to be so entrenched in the culture that it survived a transfer of power.

Minds at work, no one took note of Clarence when he walked in. Never one to willingly wade into others' tiffs, Clarence remained by the door, listened, and kept his opinions to himself.

Done with the discussion, Gary turned to Clarence and asked, "How's your progress?"

As soon as they realized Gary's question was meant for Clarence, Michelle and Edward ended their own discussion and paid attention. They knew that Gary was referring to Clarence's progress with the Oregon Slaughterhouse hack, and they were curious about it. Twice they had tried to penetrate the compound to no avail. Their next attempt *had* to succeed.

Lazador's last attempt to penetrate the warehouse resulted in Zarant Military swarming the valley. Luckily, a cyclone had passed through the area before they arrived and washed away the destroyed drone's remnants. It was now evident that the only way in would be to hack into the server and shut down the laser fence, or shut down a section large enough to let Claudia through without detection.

"We've got a couple of details to wrap up, but we'll be ready," Clarence said.

Gary nodded. He'd made the same calculation as Clarence and Claudia, that Zarant took for granted the compound's remote location and didn't put too much thought into its security, and hoped it was the right one.

The hologram table stood between the four of them. On the left side was a hologram of a sprawling concrete compound, surrounded by an earthen, lifeless valley. It was midnight and the laser fence came to life. Soon after, a mass of artificially obese people waddled out, only to stand there, listlessly.

Meanwhile, in the SF SunSafe, a young woman, with short, straight, chestnut-colored hair and big, vibrant cat eyes, stood just outside of Steven and Yesenia's front door. She was a beautiful woman with a very familiar, heart-shaped face. It took Yesenia a moment to connect a name to the face.

Is that... Rangel? The young woman smiled a dimmed smile. Yesenia blinked. "Rangel?" she said, this time out loud, certain that's who stood in their doorway. Yesenia wracked her brain, trying to recall the last time they'd seen her.

"Yesenia, hello!" The familiar voice said. "It's been a long time."

Yesenia took her and enveloped her in her petite wingspan. “Look at you! You are all grown up!”

Three years had come and gone since Yesenia and Steven last saw the young lady standing before them. Rangel was a colleague’s daughter who used to spend a lot of time in their home during the period her father, Roberto, worked with Steven. After Roberto’s role was transferred from under Zarant’s umbrella to Zalt’s, the two kept in touch, but saw each other less and less.

Although Rangel was smiling her usual sweet smile, there was a nervous undercurrent that kept wanting to pull her smile back and turn it downward.

“Come in,” Yesenia said, noting the way Rangel looked over her shoulder before nodding and entering their apartment.

How should she do this? Her father always said that if she had to trust someone other than him, Steven and Yesenia should be those people. It was odd, the way he would jokingly say it so often. Now she wondered if it was his way of drilling his message into her memory.

“Rangel, what’s wrong?”

“How—why do you ask if something is wrong?” Was it written all over her face? She had to get a grip on herself.

If her father, Roberto, got himself involved in something that he shouldn’t have been involved in, Rangel worried Zarant would also make her a target. Until she knew for certain, she had to go on as if all were right in the world. There existed a remote possibility that he was holed up in some apartment with a long-legged woman, having such a great time that he forgot to call? No. That did not sound like her father. Not at all. Roberto was in trouble. Otherwise, he would have sent word.

Without much thought, Rangel allowed Steven to lead her to the couch by the arm. Yesenia took the seat beside her while Steven took the ladderback chair, opposite them. The view from their apartment was of an apartment across the way. If it could be believed, that apartment seemed smaller than Yesenia and Steven’s tiny apartment. Rangel spied an elderly woman seated in a tattered chair, conversing with a man who had his back to the windows.

“Rangel, is everything okay?” Hesitating, Steven realized just how odd it was for Rangel to visit them on her own, after three years of having no contact. The fact that Roberto wasn’t there, and that Rangel had that petrified look on her face, even though he could see that she fought to project strength over her fear, bid him to ask, “Is it Roberto? Is he okay?”

Yesenia sat poised. She too had been wondering the reason for Rangel’s unexpected visit. Although they adored her and would welcome her any time, her being there was very much out of the ordinary.

“Unless you have just come to pay us an overdue visit?” Of course not. What would a twenty-two-year-old have in common with a forty-three and a forty-six-year-old? “Are you in trouble?” Yesenia reached for her arm and gave it a supportive squeeze. “If you are, we’ll help you, no questions asked.” It had to be why Rangel kept looking over her shoulder at the door. Yesenia wondered who she was checking for.

Steven sat up, trying not to jump to conclusions after he’d jumped to the worst one, that she’s in trouble with Zarant Military and needs help escaping. He began formulating a plan to get her out of the SF SunSafe. Gary would need to be looped in, and his consent would be required before she could be taken to Lazador for protection. After a moment’s thought, Steven realized he did not know which way Gary would go. Instead of worrying about it, he pushed the thought aside and decided to wait and see what Rangel had to say. After all, she might just be in a fight with Roberto and decided their apartment would be the best place to hide from him.

Yesenia and Steven waited for Rangel to say something.

“I am not sure what’s going on. To be honest, my father may be just fine.” Rangel buried her head in the palms of her hands for a moment, before she looked back at Yesenia and shook her head. Then, she said, “I do not know what to think. Last I saw him, he was going to visit a friend who lives inside of the Shanghai SunSafe. A colleague or something.” She remembered him almost running out the door as if it had been urgent, but she kept that to herself. It wouldn’t fundamentally change anything, really; it would only make them worry more, and Steven already had the look of concern on his face.

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Last Tuesday, and for reference, he is never spent the night away from home. Also, if he’s going to be late, he always lets me know.”

“So, no contact from him?”

Rangel answered Yesenia’s question with a head shake.

Steven was deathly quiet. Roberto had been acting suspect for some time, constantly looking over his shoulder and cancelling their meetings at the last minute. Not once had Roberto offered up a valid reason for why he suddenly could not meet. Steven never asked about it. He figured Roberto would have told him what he was into if he wanted him to know.

“You’re worried he’s gone missing.” That was Yesenia’s way of softening the meaning of her question: you’re worried the multinationals have taken him and left him roaming outside of the SF SunSafe, for the sun to take. It was every West Side resident’s primary fear when someone they loved went missing. More often than not, their fears were justified.

Rangel nodded. That was exactly what she was worried about.

Yesenia took a moment to think and process. “Shanghai?” She asked next, wondering how Roberto managed to get to the Shanghai SunSafe when all inter-SunSafe Transport booths were shut down. She knew Steven wondered the same thing.

“I’m mortified about coming to you with this. If General Garret were still around, I would have gone to him—”

Without realizing it, Steven had moved and was sitting at the edge of his seat. “You knew the General?”

Rangel nodded, surprised at Steven’s interest. “He and my dad have been close friends for about three years now. They had been spending a lot of time together at our place.”

“They had?” That was odd. Roberto had feigned ignorance and disinterest when Steven told him about General Garret’s disappearance. Why had he done that?

“I’m pretty sure General Garret is the reason I have a job interview scheduled for tomorrow, at Zarant Headquarters.” Rangel said. She was being realistic.

“Job interview?” Yesenia’s interest was piqued. The odds of someone like her, a West Side girl, getting as far as she had in the interview process with Zarant has been unheard of in recent years. She lacked the foremost requirement: nepotism.

“At this point, it could all be a mistake, a vetting glitch by BOB.” BOB was the application vetting algorithm Zarant used to narrow down the list of applicants. “But if it’s not, what else would explain it?”

“Garret has been missing for nine months. How could he have managed that?”

Rangel shrugged. “I don’t know. What I know is that last year, against my father’s wishes, he came to my school and assured me that if I ever wanted a job at Zarant, that I need only apply.” Rangel easily recalled the way she’d stood there after he’d left. Stunned. He’d literally come to the school for that specific purpose. The next time she saw him, he had been at the dinner table with her father. She had greeted them and he acted as though it had never happened.

Need only apply? Steven’s brow furrowed. Did General Garret have that kind of pull? And why Rangel? Gaining employment at a multinational was as elusive as winning admittance to the SunSafe—it never happened. You had to have a wealthy, SF SunSafe East Side family connection, and like themselves, Rangel lacked that.

“Why would he tell you that?”

Once again, Rangel shrugged to show that she was as confused as they were. “I don’t know, but I applied and... well, I have a final interview scheduled for tomorrow.” Rangel’s confusion could be heard in her voice. “It’s the final interview.” That took Yesenia and Steven aback. If she was on her final interview, then it couldn’t have been a fluke. “He did something. Otherwise, what explains it? Of my entire graduating class, I’m the only person I know of that actually received a call back, and now I’m on a final interview?” Shaking her head, she added, “That can’t be a coincidence.”

No one knew what to make of it. Why would General Garret take such a keen interest in Rangel? Every question came back to why? Why Rangel? Unfortunately, even Rangel seemed to be asking the very same question.

“Rangel, is it possible that your potential employment with Zarant has something to do with your father’s disappearance?”

Biting her bottom lip, Rangel shrugged. She had contemplated that possibility over the last few days, but she was nowhere nearer to knowing.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’ll find him and bring him home.”

Steven nodded, wishing he could feel as confident as his wife sounded. “It’ll take us a couple of days to figure out a way to Transport to Shanghai. All Transport booths are shut down. Hopefully, we’ll manage. Meanwhile, say nothing to anyone, and act as if nothing is wrong.”

“I’ll do my best.” Rangel ran her fingers through her hair. She *had* been doing her best. “I guess I better sweep the apartment for bugs.”

Surprised, Yesenia gave her a nod. “Do you need to borrow our bug sweeper?”

“No. I know where my dad keeps his.” Rangel smiled. “My dad didn’t trust Zarant. I guess you all don’t either.”

Yesenia and Steven exchanged a surprised look. They had a bug sweeper because Gary had insisted that they sweep regularly. Why would Roberto, a regular employee, have a bug sweeper in his home? It had to tie to General Garret. The only way to get the answers they needed was to find Roberto. Hopefully, he was still alive.

Twenty-Four

August 20, 2046.

After the job interview, Rangel stood to shake Izaiah's hand, thanking him for the interview. Flustered by her lackluster performance, she quickly turned to Star, gave her a brief smile, and extended her hand. When Star's hand didn't extend to meet hers, her heart sank, but she forced herself to raise her chin and meet her eyes with a forced smile. Star was clearly done with her.

With nothing more to say, Rangel turned to gather her things.

Wisps of whispered conversation brushed past her ears. They were talking about her; about her performance and the merits of her candidacy for the job. Self-doubt and insecurity began stalking her like prey; she had to get out of there before it overtook her. Administrative Assistant? That's the position they found most suitable for her based on her application, when she had earned an engineering degree? She found it impossible not to feel insecure.

In theory, jobs were applied for by submitting a resume and a five-hundred question personality test. Based on those findings, individuals were identified and selected for any available positions. In reality, jobs were created and granted for the offspring of the wealthy and well connected.

Perspiration beads began to permeate her brow. Star and Izaiah should have waited until she'd left the room before discussing her interview performance, which she totally bombed because of *them*. They had discombobulated her, caused her to become awkward and second-guess her own answers. They hit her with incongruent interview questions, such as Izaiah's probe into her relationship status. Then there were the personal jabs that Star took at her. Why would Star assume that Rangel's residence in the SF's West Side diminished her ability to do the job? Never mind the comments Star made regarding

Rangel's height, as if it had offended her that Rangel "dared" to be a full hand taller than her! Between the two, they sent Rangel's brain into a confused stutter.

Rangel had prepared for a job interview, not for a personal assault session.

Regardless, Rangel needed the job. Now that it was done, she wished she could do something to convey to them that her performance was in no way indicative of her ability. But the opportunity did not present itself. Instead, Rangel told herself to get going before they decided to throw her out.

"Thank you both for the opportunity to interview for the position," Rangel said, as she reached the door. Anxious, she had to force her legs to stay put for a second longer.

The long, glass, conference room table ran the length of the room. Rangel stood at one end by the door, while Star and Izaiah stood at the other. Twelve white, faux calf-skin chairs trimmed the table. Glass walls encapsulated the room. Zarant's Corporate Headquarters was at the edge of the city. The views extended from floor-to-ceiling. The corner office on the fortieth floor showcased the parched world beyond the SF SunSafe. The two other walls were in privacy mode, which meant they behaved as one-way glass.

The whispers abruptly halted and an exasperated Star turned from Izaiah to face Rangel. She leveled her cold blue eyes on Rangel and said, "You're still here." Stone-faced, Star growled her words. Ice daggers shot from her eyes and further impaled Rangel's confidence.

It bothered Rangel that Star could make her feel so insignificant with nothing more than the way she looked at her.

"Thank you for coming in, Rangel," Izaiah said, jumping in. "It was very nice to meet you."

Par for the course as far as Rangel was concerned. At every turn during the interview, Star had come at her with a sharp-edged tone in an attacking manner, and then Izaiah overcompensated for Star's harshness by lobbing her softball questions wrapped in an apologetic cadence.

Izaiah's eyes locked with Rangel's a bit longer than she thought appropriate, and his smile sent a warm flutter straight to her gut. Her attraction to Izaiah had been the largest factor of her discombobulation. Confusion turned Rangel's cheeks a reddish hue, which added a jagged edge to Star's glare as she awkwardly exited the room.

Security cameras followed Rangel out.

Outside of Zarrant Headquarters, Rangel allowed herself to pause and gather her emotional spillage. A camera, tucked into the seam between the right-hand side glass wall and the ceiling, made a low mechanical noise as it turned to follow her. There were other cameras linearly aligned along the seam of the Skywalk. Aware of having so many “eyes” on her, Rangel forced her feet to move again. With the failed interview temporarily forgotten, her thoughts and her ears focused on nothing but the low buzz of the cameras that moved when she started walking. It wasn’t until she was beyond the Skywalk that fed into Zarrant Headquarters that the cameras stopped focusing solely on her. There were cameras beyond that point, but beyond Zarrant’s feeder Skywalk, people far outnumbered cameras.

Unable to stop herself, her mind began regurgitating the interview. It would be a long walk home. Within minutes, she felt herself wallowing in a pool of anxiety. That interview had been her one chance. At least she wouldn’t have to explain to her father that she would be working for Zarrant. Roberto had been adamant about her staying out of the work force, insisting that it was more important to stay off Zarrant’s radar. In contrast, Rangel was surprised to find that Steven and Yesenia had stopped by that morning to wish her luck with the interview.

Their words had been supportive and sweet.

Rangel was too preoccupied with her thoughts to notice the hostile stares being sent her way by the skintight, faux-calfskin, bodysuit-wearing residents of the wealthier neighborhood she had to cut through to get back to her own side of the city. The undercurrent of hostility towards SunSafe residents wearing beige hemp overalls walking in the East Side Skywalks was palpable. Had she been paying them any mind she would have walked faster.

Figuring out what to do next felt daunting, so she thought about Izaiah and the way he had looked at her. It was as if he knew her intimately. The thought of him sent a barrage of confusion and butterflies fluttering around inside her stomach. One upside to totally crashing in the job interview was that she would not have to figure out what to do about her attraction to Izaiah. The issue had more than likely become moot. They’d never see

each other again. And Star, who'd felt the need to reiterate how unqualified Rangel was for the position, no longer mattered.

"The least they could have done was give me the seat with the view, since it seemed they had already made up their minds about not hiring me," Rangel spoke the words for her own frustrated benefit.

Throughout the interview, Star's steely blue eyes had done nothing but shoot ice picks at Rangel. By the interview's end, her confidence had become so riddled with holes that Rangel found herself doubting every answer she gave. Adding salt to injury, Star made no effort to hide the fact that she disapproved of the interview taking place at all. She could still picture Star's auburn curls, the way they so delicately bounced on her shoulder, every time she cut Rangel off mid-answer. *Always* with a firm shake of her head to signal anything Rangel said unworthy of her ears. And her lips! Star had kept them pursed the entire time! Flatlined, as if a hint of a smile would have deleterious consequences for her pinched, pink face.

The woman was likely just like her father, Zachary Kendall, the wealthiest and most powerful man in the world. Zachary appeared to have gifted his daughter with his narcissism and caustic personality traits.

Again, her thoughts returned to Izaiah. The thought of his handsome face and strong jaw made her exhale. Tall and built into a lean physique, he was easy to look at—maybe too easy. He had unnerved her with his simple smile and casual glances, which she'd found very unhelpful during the interview.

"Rangel." A familiar voice called her name just as she felt the tap on her shoulder that jolted her out of her thoughts.

"Hey, Kiers." Kiersten was smiling as she poked her arm through the crook of Rangel's arm.

Unlike Rangel, Kiersten became a bit distracted by the passersby in their skintight bodysuits who openly sized her up. In a sign of rebellion, when one stared too long, Kiersten held his eyes with hers, then bequeathed him with a mock curtsy. She became pleased with herself when he abashedly looked away and scurried off, affronted that she had the audacity to return his cowardly microaggressions.

"I never get to the wealthy side of the SunSafe." For all of the decline in the lives of the West Side residents, things appeared to be the same for the folks of the East Side. That realization bothered Kiersten. "They live in a bubble on this side." Kiersten's observation was full of conviction and didn't require a response from Rangel. Kiersten tugged on Rangel's arm for them to walk a little faster. She said, "Here, let's move to a space where we can talk with just a little more privacy, and less hostility."

Deflation downed Rangel's spirits as she said, "I'll just tell you now. The interview didn't go so well."

Kiersten hurried them along, until she heard Rangel's assessment of the job interview. It wasn't good.

Suddenly stopped, Kiersten turned to face Rangel and demanded to know how she could know that.

"I just know." Rangel shrugged and followed Kiersten when she started walking again.

"I don't accept it."

"Look, Kiers. The whole interview was sort of bizarre. Izaiah, the guy that interviewed me, lobbed me questions that were more personal in their nature than they were relevant to the position." It crossed Rangel's mind that the entire interview process had been a farce. A way for Zarant to be able to say that it gives opportunity to West Side residents, but that they simply weren't skilled enough to make it beyond the interview process, or something along those lines.

Kiersten's curiosity was expressed with a sideways crook of the mouth. "Give me an example."

Shrugging, Rangel said, "Okay. He asked me how my mother was doing."

Kiersten's head jerked. She hadn't been expecting that. "Does he know your mother?"

"How could he? Even I've never met my mother." Rangel's mother abandoned her and her father, Roberto, when she was a baby. Rangel had no memories of her. Also, Roberto wasn't her biological father. He had met her mother after she was already pregnant. Roberto said that she had grown manic depressive, but he never elaborated beyond that, and Rangel never pushed for more information.

"That's just really odd."

“Honestly, it was like the whole interview was some sort of charade. Star, yes, that’s another thing. Star, the ice queen herself, was there. For an entry-level position? Isn’t that strange?” Kiersten’s brow bunched together. Star’s presence was quite curious. From what they knew of Star, via second-hand information from other people, including Roberto, Star was a “pedestal” type. She never got her hands dirty by mingling with staff. “Anyway, where Star had been rough and demeaning, Izaiah had been encouraging. I felt like she would bulldoze me and then he would come and prop me back up. And his eyes! There was something in his eyes when he looked at me. He knocked me off my game.”

Kiersten grinned. “Well, he is gorgeous.” Izaiah was Zachary’s extremely handsome Chief of Staff who had a cultlike following amongst the ladies. Kiersten was one of those ladies.

Not comfortable admitting she was attracted to Izaiah, Rangel brushed off the comment. “Honestly, the two of them behaved as if they were in a scene right out of *War of the Roses*. Also, it felt like Star’s presence was a source of ire for Izaiah. I swear his jaw would tighten every time she spoke. He never once directed his ire at me, but she sure did.” Disappointment bungled her brow. “It was so discombobulating. I got the sense that Star showed up just to make sure that I didn’t get the job, which I know sounds ridiculous.” It sounded ridiculous to her own ears. Star would have no reason to care about *her*, a nobody. But then, what explained their behavior?

Kiersten could see that Rangel was flustered, and she was too. What if Rangel having that job was the only way that they could acquire information on Roberto and Key’s whereabouts? Kiersten did not have to ask Rangel to know she’d already had the same thought. “Rangel, take a deep breath.” Suddenly feeling a local resident’s eyes on them, she decided to get moving. “Let’s walk and talk. Start from the beginning.”

Kiersten listened to Rangel as she watched Zarant Military guards erecting a checkpoint between the East Side and West Side. She disapproved.

As they walked, Rangel recounted the entire interview and occasionally added her own thoughts. As they moved towards their neighborhood, the number of loiterers grew thicker; bodysuits were exchanged for jumpsuits; the number of people crowded per-square-foot increased the deeper into the West Side they moved. The air also changed. Body odor punctuated the air they breathed. Filthy carpets, holier than a church goer on

a Sunday morning, made a poor effort at covering the concrete floor of the Skywalks. In some sections, it had been removed all together. Grimy furniture with torn upholstery dotted the lobbies of the buildings. The residents, however, were the worse for wear. Dejected and demoralized, they clearly didn't delude themselves with false notions of a bright horizon where one did not exist.

ENOUGH! was graffitied on the walls with lipstick and sometimes blood. "Have you heard from Key?"

Kiersten shook her head. "What were we thinking? We should have walked out of that building the minute that woman started speaking. We knew better than to hang around!"

Rangel nodded. Upon hearing about Key, Yesenia and Steven had vociferously expressed their disapproval of her having been anywhere near the protest. They refused to accept her explanation that they had only been passing through, and they insisting it was only an excuse.

Placing a hand on Kiersten's arm, Rangel kept them moving forward. "We should have walked away when that redhead got on that box. We should have started walking." They could say it over and over again, but both knew it changed nothing. It was too late to take it back now.

They walked in silence. Each wondering how they were going to get Roberto and Key back.

"They have to have gotten Key," Kiersten said, unable to imagine her lively friend being kept in a dark prison cell. Key wasn't built for that. She was too much of a firecracker. "I can't stop worrying about her."

"Same here," Rangel said, placing her hands in her overall pockets. Knowing Key, the way she did, it was impossible not to worry. Key never knew when to give up on a fight. "Kiers, I contacted some friends who agreed to do some digging."

"Can they help get information on Roberto and Key?"

Rangel hoped they could. "They said that they would update me as soon as they know anything. I'm supposed to meet with them again tomorrow."

Kiersten nodded, relief showing on her face. "Should I come with you?"

“Not necessary. I know and trust these people.” Steven and Yesenia wanted her to keep their identities to herself. “Besides, they did not give me details on the place or time. It’ll be a last-minute thing, for their own security.”

Kiersten accepted Rangel’s explanation, though she would have liked to come along. “Elevator?” She was curious to know who *they* were and *how* she knew them, but she satisfied her curiosity by telling herself they were helping. So, if keeping their identity secret was that important to them, she would respect their wishes and not press Rangel for details, not that Rangel would oblige her anyway.

“Absolutely.” Rangel lived on the fourteenth floor, four floors above them now. The stairs were as congested as the elevator, only they smelled worse and would have to be endured for a longer period of time. There were two flights of ten stairs between floors.

The nine elevators were all moving between floors. One opened, but it was full to capacity and there was no way to squeeze in. They stood back and waited for another one.

“What will you tell your dad if you get the job?” Kiersten assumed Roberto would come home soon. It was her way of hanging on to hope.

Amused by the question, Rangel laughed loud and drew some eyes. Shrugging them off she said, “Yeah, given how the interview went, I doubt I’ll have to worry about that.”

Kiersten picked up on the disappointment that colored Rangel’s laugh.

“Elevator! Hurry!” They squeezed in just in time. Rangel’s floor had already been selected. As the doors closed, the red light just below the security camera flipped on, signaling that faces and conversations were being recorded. No one paid it any mind. The citizens of the SunSafe’s West Side had long ago conceded their right to privacy. Kiersten, on the other hand, was keenly aware of being watched. To circumvent the facial recognition software, she quickly applied some of the facial fracture cream Rangel found in her father’s equipment bag. They had come across it while searching for clues of his whereabouts and what he might have been into.

Facial fracture cream had properties that resemble shattered glass. Every time the wearer blinks or moves a facial muscle, the caked, translucent cream fissured into smaller segments of microscopic mirrors that reflect a constantly shifting prism of color and light back to the camera. No one inside the elevator was paying attention to the camera, but if

they had, they would have noticed that the lens kept adjusting itself in its failed effort to lock onto Kiersten's features.

When the doors opened again, the girls walked into a glass tunnel suspended between two high-rises. They were making their way towards Rangel's home.

"Did you see that?" Rangel said, and gave Kiersten a funny look. That was the first time she had ever seen the facial recognition cameras struggle to lock onto a face—Kiersten's face. The two cameras appeared to be aimed right at her, and their lenses kept zooming in and out, as if trying to adjust a blurry image.

"See what?" Kiersten's grin said she knew exactly what Rangel was referring to.

"Oh, my God, Kiers. We need to go!" Zarant Military guards were coming down the far end of the Skywalk. They were clearly searching for someone.

"Oh. I better get going. That might be for me," Kiersten said, tilting her head towards the fast-approaching guards.

Guards began muscling their way through the crowds. When Rangel turned her angst-filled eyes back, Kiersten was already running into a crowded stairwell.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Rangel turned and faced out of the Skywalk windows, towards the sere ground below the darkening gray sky. Surprise and confusion had to be her reaction when the guards approached her. Another deep breath helped her clear her thoughts and focus on the remnants of the quintessential San Francisco row houses that seemed to sway from the 152-degree Fahrenheit heat. Momentarily forgetting the guards, Rangel placed her forehead against the warm glass, wondering whether there would ever again come a time when leaded glass cities weren't needed to protect the living from the sun's touch.

A ruckus brought her back to the present. She looked behind her to where four bulky guards were cutting through people, shoving the men aside and turning the women around to look at their faces. As she contemplated the best way to circumvent the guards' efforts to capture Kiersten, the Skywalk turned dark along with the world outside. Dark, fat clouds, saturated with moisture to the point of bursting, rushed across the sky, zealously hoarding the rain they carried—not one drop of moisture fell to the parched ground below.

Friction began gyrating the glass Skywalk. Wide-eyed residents became frozen in place by sudden fear and awe as the roof of a Victorian below was lifted into the air,

rotating fiercely, completing each rotation in shorter time, until it was released and went flying off towards the horizon. Gasps of shock came from every mouth as abrupt jolts of intense wind rocked the SunSafe, tugging at it, trying to yank it away and send it in the same direction that they had just watched the roof disappear. By then, residents were screaming. Terrified, people in sweaty hemp jumpsuits were running for the perceived safety of their apartments, and the comfort of their families.

Chaos quickly ensued and the military guards became overwhelmed with panicked residents and were forced to temporarily abandon their hunt.

Sand was flying at Zarant Headquarters' windows. A windstorm was blowing outside, but not hard enough to physically scathe the glass.

"I don't care. I've already told you." Star was at her office windows, watching the scattering people in the distant Skywalk through the haze of flying dust and debris. "I want to know what he's up to. I want to know why he had to have that girl hired." Star's eyes burned with a hot fury. "I want to know how he got daddy to agree to hire a cockroach."

Kahn smirked. His slimy eyes were travelling up and down Star's figure, taking the opportunity while she kept her back to him. "Who is this girl?"

"Her name is Rangel." Star's lips pursed as if saying the name left a bad taste in her mouth. Her blue eyes, usually a cool blue, were ice cold. "I've sent you the file on her. Read it. Dig into her past. I want to know what kind of hold she has on Izaiah." Star turned to face Kahn and his eyes quickly shot up to meet hers. Grinning, knowing he lusted after her, she lazily walked to her desk and slithered into her seat. "It is too bad that you are not Izaiah. I would have you right now."

It pleased Star to have placed Rangel at the center of Kahn's radar. His rough, Neanderthal behavior towards women had the same impact as a torture vice on his victims.

Kahn's eyes narrowed with fury. How dare she intimate that he was less than that sniveling Izaiah! If she weren't Zachary's daughter, she would be sorry she uttered those words. It would behoove her to govern her tongue. Her old man won't live forever.

"I'll take care of it," Kahn said, as he forced himself to swallow his own pride. He locked his blue eyes with hers, trying to mask the ego blow she'd dealt him.

"I expect nothing less," Star said, suddenly overcome with boredom. With a flippant hand gesture, she summoned her keyboard and began typing. Soon after, she became annoyed that Kahn remained before her. Antagonized, she sat back, crossed her arms, and demanded to know, "Why are you still here?"

Kahn bit his tongue. The right side of his mouth twitched. Fury burned within him, but there could be no release. He would have to seek out another outlet, one that wasn't Zachary's daughter. Holding in his anger, Kahn turned on his heels like a good soldier and stormed out.

Satisfied with herself, Star leaned back in her chair and began drawing circles on her desktop with her left index finger. Izaiah was on her mind. The cat and mouse game had grown tiresome. She would have him, or no one would.

A sly smile broke her thin lips. Star knew her father had grown exceedingly paranoid over the last few years. Some speculated that his paranoia grew alongside his acquisition of wealth and power. There was no way for her to know for sure, but she did not care. Either Izaiah would choose her, or she would turn her father against him and make him regret the day he rejected her.

Twenty-Five

The next day, Star marched into Izaiah's office and slammed the door shut behind her. As usual, she was impeccably dressed in an outfit with a price tag that could easily feed the impoverished West Side of the San Francisco SunSafe community for days.

The black heels she wore gave her five ft. two in. frame a couple of inches, not that she needed them to help with her confidence. Arms crossed, she stood before him. Her bare, pink ankles stood a foot apart from each other, and her legs came together somewhere beneath the tight, knee-length, black pencil-skirt she wore, which she complemented nicely with a sky-blue, button-down blouse that matched her eyes.

Contrary to Star's assumption, Izaiah was not admiring her beauty. No, he was taking in the rotten aura of the woman before him, thinking how much he despised her.

"Are you done!?" Star said, wondering when Izaiah would figure out that he could go much further with her than ogling, if only he made a move. But the fool would not act, or pick up on her overtures. Star had begun to wonder if she was going to have to put *it* in his hand for him to know *it* was his.

Izaiah smirked to show Star that she didn't intimidate him, but she misinterpreted it as a sign that he was pleased to see her.

"What is it?" Izaiah sat back in his chair and didn't care that it annoyed her when he addressed her so casually. Izaiah was one of the few people who didn't care that Star was Zachary's daughter. He showed her how little her DNA meant to him at every opportunity he got.

Star's hands went to her waist, her right foot tapped up and down rapidly, and her blue eyes turned a steely gray. "Father is having concerns about Devon and wants your input." She bit her upper lip, just as she always did when she was annoyed.

“Why not your input? You’re the one related to him.” Star was related to both Zachary and Devon. Devon was Star’s cousin on her mother’s side, the son of her only uncle, Johnathan. And everyone knew that she was Zachary’s daughter. “If anything, Devon would likely be more candid with you, since *you’re his cousin*.” A slight twitch of Star’s right eye let him know his words hit their mark, but he wanted to hear her say it.

Izaiah knew that Zachary favored *him* over his own daughter. Zachary’s misogyny was applied without discrimination or preference, with only one exception. The only woman Zachary seemed to heed was Lila Duarte. When Star’s hands balled into fists, Izaiah allowed himself a smidge of a smile as he pretended not to notice her annoyance. Instead, he concentrated his attention on the smoothness of his relatively new executive desk.

The desk was walnut. As part of his promotion to Zachary’s Chief of Staff—a promotion that sent Star into a raging fit that cost her family estate a few priceless, irreplaceable heirlooms—he was given access, by Zachary himself, to his vast family vault of antique furniture. Inside the vault he saw many pieces of beautifully preserved furniture from all over the world. A smaller room adjacent to it held mounds of sterling chandeliers, candelabras, artwork, and other precious metal objects. One of the guards escorting him, a short man with a bitterness that lived on his face and turned his eyes into squinty slits, mentioned a gold vault. He explained with a sourpuss mouth that every wealthy family had their own gold vault. Before Izaiah could ask to see Zachary’s, the guard wagged his finger at him and shook his head.

Refocusing his attention back on Star, Izaiah saw that her eyes had zeroed in on the holographic still-image of himself and Zachary. They wore SunSafety suits and posed somewhere outside of the SunSafe. Both men had broad smiles and an arm around the other’s shoulders.

Star hissed.

The image floated dead center on the credenza, alongside nothing else. When he placed it there, Izaiah made certain that nothing else would distract from the photograph. It was a strategic placement, exactly where Star was sure to see it every time she walked into his office. As a boon, it helped to ensure he was given the respect his position entitled him to, by everyone who marched into his office making irrational demands, Kahn, in

particular. That very morning, Kahn had stormed into Izaiah's office to demand he fire Cristina's secretary, whom Izaiah knew had rebuffed his sexual advances.

Following Star's gaze, Izaiah let a fraction of a smile slip onto his lips. It was odd, but he actually enjoyed bathing in her envy and insecurity. It was childish and he knew that, but she was evil. Hate did not begin to describe what he felt towards her.

Ignoring his question, Star continued with her thread and said, "Devon is making his way here today. He will surely want to be looped into the Shanghai SunSafe situation. That is your in with him."

The Shanghai SunSafe was set to go Dark. The thought of all of those people dying because Zachary and the other CEOs decided to play God, and cull the population further, made his skin crawl.

"Okay, I'll have a chat with him." Izaiah said, needing to move his body to hide the shiver that shot through it, so he sat forward and placed his elbows on the desktop. He didn't have the time to spare, but it was clear that Zachary, once again, hadn't wanted Star on the task.

"That won't be enough. Father wants a more... he wants a *substantiated* observation. We have a lot of important pieces moving right now, and we need to know he can be trusted." Crossing her legs at her ankles, she leaned back against the closed door and made it clearer for him. "Devon's loyalty needs to be confirmed before daddy gives him too much information."

Moving pieces? For the last couple of years, Zachary had grown incessant about those "moving pieces" and Izaiah had yet to figure out what those pieces entailed. Also, what was she asking him for? No way was she asking for what he thought she was asking.

"You can't mean that you want me to surveil Devon!"

"Of course, I can. You know dad, he's paranoid."

There was no denying that, especially since Zachary had been breaking unwritten rules: the wealthy are off limits; their food is off limits; their neurochips are off limits; and their families are off limits. Izaiah wondered what would happen if they ever learned that Zachary had been pilfering their neurochips and listening in on their personal conversations? Or what they would do if they ever discovered that Zachary was planning

to make unwitting cannibals out of them? Izaiah wasn't supposed to know any of that, but Garret had made sure he did.

Just before his disappearance, General Garret had broken his own rules and shared top-secret information with him. Most of what Garret shared had not surprise Izaiah. Only two items were new information: the contents of the food jars, and Garret's insistence that he hire Rangel. The importance of the latter was something Izaiah was still trying to puzzle out. The former, however, had taken a heavy toll on him. It left Izaiah badly shaken. In fact, it took him several days to reconcile the information. For a couple of weeks after, he'd had to tell anyone who asked that he felt ill and under the weather in an effort to explain his sudden pallor.

It now occurred to Izaiah that nothing Zachary did should surprise him. The man, like his daughter, had no conscience.

"Why doesn't Zachary just blackmail him like he did the others? Blackmail has generally guaranteed him loyalty." Zachary had become so loathed by his "peers" that blackmail had become the only way he could secure loyalty anymore. But Izaiah did not need to say that part out loud. He knew that Star well knew that.

"Devon may be too much like his father." She looked around Izaiah's desk, at the quarter-sized file drives that were piled to the middle of a clear cylindrical glass. She couldn't help but wonder what else her father had tasked him with, but she was too proud to ask. "Of course, mother is likely fierce about protecting him. If anything happened to him, you know mother would get involved."

Poor Star. Everyone was loved more than her. Izaiah gave a miniscule shake of the head at Star's self-pity party. Enough of one to satisfy himself. Deciding he would play along, Izaiah, fingered his cufflink and said, "So basically, Zachary is trying to determine whether antagonizing Elizabeth is a risk he needs to take."

Izaiah doubted whether Elizabeth would be the wiser to any events that took place beyond the walls of her bedroom, given that she kept herself in a perpetual self-medicated state. It was common knowledge. It was also common knowledge that Star and Zachary regularly behaved as though Elizabeth's *condition* were nothing more than a rumor running through the rumor mill.

"Correct."

Izaiah stopped playing with his cufflinks and sat up again, placing both of his hands on his desktop. “So, am I understanding you correctly? You are asking me to put a sitting CEO under surveillance?” He crossed his arms and shook his head. “And not just any CEO, but the one that happens to be your mother’s beloved nephew?” He pictured how badly things would go for him if she ever sobered up and found out. Izaiah had gone back to shaking his head. This time there was more vigor in each shake. “Elizabeth would castrate me!”

A feline smile unwound Star’s pursed lips. The thought of his possible castration seemed to amuse her. “You disappoint me. Mother need not ever find out.” Locking the door behind her, Star sensually slithered her way to a soft, cloned calfskin chair that was directly across from Izaiah and his desk. “Saddle him with that new girl you so desperately want to hire... Rangel. She did not seem too bright.” Star belittled people when they threatened her. Izaiah knew that, so he kept his mouth shut. Keeping her eyes on him, Star tilted her head to the side. “Stop looking so worried, it’s only for a little while. Kahn is working on a method to track his every move without him suspecting it.”

Izaiah did not like the sound of that. “What method is that? And, why do you think Devon would never be the wiser?” Was it something they could employ on the neurochipped without their knowledge? He felt his body grow tense just as Star was clearly relaxing.

“Oh, don’t worry. You haven’t done anything that requires Kahn’s scrutiny. Have you?” It was a veiled threat.

The fact of the matter was that Kahn didn’t need an excuse to go after Izaiah. All Star needed to do was ask. Aside from Star, there was no one more envious of his relationship with Zachary than Kahn. It would be a stupid mistake on Izaiah’s part to ever ignore that. Izaiah knew that the only thing keeping Kahn from making him walk naked under the sun was Zachary’s implied protection.

Before Izaiah could reply, the sun outside of the heavily tinted windows disappeared behind a sandstorm that turned the world outside opaque. An awful and frightening sound arose, causing the windows to shake and rattle, filling the room with a screeching, clawing sound, as if an animal were savagely trying to claw its way in. They both looked out to

confirm what they already knew was occurring. Izaiah easily imagined the citizens in the Skywalks running for cover, and it saddened him.

“Those are occurring with greater frequency and much more intensity. Our SunSafe community is being taken apart, high-rise by high-rise.”

Responding with an indifferent shrug, Star placed both hands on the armrests of her chair and slowly ran them up and down, over the soft faux leather. Without skipping a beat, she brought the conversation back to Devon. “Devon’s an imbecile who got his position because his daddy is my mother’s only brother.” That comment brought a grin to Izaiah’s lips that made him wonder why the privileged class never seem to realize they were just that—privileged. “Just do whatever you have to do to make sure he’s not going to be a problem.”

Devon, a problem? He was the only family member with a conscience, as far as Izaiah could surmise. Perhaps it was his conscience they found threatening. Whatever Zachary was up to, he was taking extreme risks to accomplish it. Placing a sitting CEO under surveillance is not something that should be taken lightly, not even by Zachary.

Izaiah had to tread carefully. If it ever got out that Devon was under surveillance, he knew that Zachary would throw him under the bus to save his own hide, regardless of how much Zachary liked him. Zachary was not the kind of man that let personal feelings get in the way of covering his own ass.

“Good boy,” Star said as her shapeless lips pulled into flat lines and her affected, nasally voice rose a few octaves. Star’s entire existence grated on his nerves like nails on a chalkboard. He only wished that annoyance would have expressed itself before he had slept with her, before she had become obsessive and possessive over him.

Star rose to leave, when she thought twice about it and retook her seat. “I was going to try to stop you from hiring that little wench you’re so fascinated with.” Dark waves of anger began thrashing around in the depths of her blue eyes. “But we both know you’re just doing it to make me jealous. So, I’m going to let you have your fun... for a little while.” Like a lion stalking her prey, Star leaned forward and smirked when she saw Izaiah lean away in response. “But don’t get too attached.”

A grating, metal cry pulled their attention to the sandstorm thrashing about outside of the floor-to-ceiling wall of windows.

“Rangel is—” Izaiah began, before Star interrupted him.

“Stop! Don’t say her name. I hate the sound of it on your lips.” Star stood and stalked around the desk like a hissing cat. “Tell me, how do you know her?”

Izaiah wanted to roll his eyes. He was not about to share with her the information General Garret shared with him before his disappearance. “I don’t personally know her!” He was not lying. General Garrett had insinuated that she was the key; and that it was imperative that he hire her when she applied for a position. Somehow, the General had known she would apply. General Garret had once mentioned something to do with her mother, but then he disappeared before he ever said more about it.

They were interrupted by a firm knock at the door.

“Yes?” Izaiah called, trying to control his anger. Who the hell did Star think she was? Certainly not his wife! He did not recall giving her control of his personal life. He didn’t have any romantic intentions towards Rangel, though he couldn’t deny that he’d been shocked by the strong attraction he’d felt towards her.

“Sir, Devon is here to see you.” Amanda, his spunky assistant, used her key to unlock the door and peek her head in. She never walked into his office when Star was in there. Star frightened her. Star frightened everyone.

“Star, I better...” Izaiah mumbled the rest, grateful for the interruption. The timing could not have been better.

“You better,” was all she said before turning to leave. As she made her way out, Devon was walking in. They addressed each other curtly, and he moved aside to let her pass.

Devon rolled his eyes after her. “Izaiah,” he said, greeting him with slight nod of the head and an extended hand. “Zachary asked me to come see you.”

Izaiah smiled, wishing he had not.

Meanwhile, on the Executive’s floor, there was an urgency in his walk and an angst in his eyes as he crossed the executive floor of Zarant Headquarters. Preferring not to raise eyebrows, he slowed his pace as he neared Zachary’s open door, noting the absent assistant.

The hushed intonation of hurried whispers floated out from within Zachary's office. Avi's ears perked up, and his eyes searched for the origin just as Kahn, who was standing in a cluster with Lila and Zachary, happened to glance in his direction.

They locked eyes.

Avi could feel the beads of sweat sprouting from his pores.

Kahn's body stiffened and the group hushed.

Their pointed stares felt as though they were boring into his back. The distinct sound of a door closing and the click of a lock startled his jumpy senses.

Avi chanced a glance back and was relieved to see that Kahn was not behind him. The sight of Kahn alone had been enough to make him feel as though the blood had drained from his body. It had always been that way. The worst part about Kahn, besides the bullying, was the way he looked at a person with such malice that the subject usually crumbled with fear. The only person he had known to push back was Cristina, whom he was on his way to pay a visit to. Unfortunately, Cristina's office was located at the farthest end of the executive floor.

As soon as Cristina's assistant, Adella, saw Avi approaching, she sent an electronic message to her boss. With a push of a holographic button, Cristina's office door swung open. "She's expecting you."

Avi nodded, still shaken over his near encounter with Kahn.

"I'm not sure what's taking place in Zachary's office with Kahn and Lila, but whatever it is, they're certainly being paranoid about it," Avi said, entering Cristina's office and looking right at her.

They should be paranoid, Cristina thought to herself, looking at Avi, waiting for him to hurry up and shut the door.

"What is going on? The urgency in your voice had me worried that Zachary's minions were—" Avi cut himself off when he noticed the stack of paper on her desk. Paper! Real Paper! Not trusting his eyes, he spoke the words out loud. "Cristina, is that paper?" A page was in her right hand. "A report printed on real paper!" Hurrying across the length of the room, Avi kept his eyes focused on the stack before her. His baggy, ill-fitting suit seemed to chase after him.

“Typed. This report is typed with an old-fashioned typewriter. You can see it if you look closely.”

Avi stopped. “A typewriter? Who has a typewriter anymore?”

“Who has a printer? Or paper, for that matter?”

“Point taken.” Hovering over Cristina’s desk like a child impatiently awaiting his turn to play with the shiny new toy, he reached out and let his right hand feel the coolness of the paper. “You lucky girl. What did you do to earn this much paper?” His own words did not make sense to him. Zachary hated Cristina. He would never give her anything, much less something as valuable as paper. “Zachary wouldn’t.”

“No. Definitely not Zachary,” Cristina said, deciding he should read the report before she said more.

When the trees disappeared, paper became a precious finite resource. The only remaining crates of the stuff were in an oxygen deprived, temperature-controlled room in Zarant’s treasure room. Given the sensitivity of the information before her, she was certain the stack of paper did not come from Zachary. In fact, Cristina was certain that he would have her arrested and tortured if he ever suspected she’d come into it.

Without a word, Cristina placed the page she held in her hand onto the stack, then tidied the stack of papers as she eyed Avi, who was eyeing the report before her. Reminding herself that she had to trust someone, she pushed the stack towards him. “You need to read this.”

Blindly finding the chair behind him with his hands, he pulled it towards him and sat. Tempering his excitement, he breathed and exhaled. He really didn’t give two figs about what the report said—it was the priceless pieces of paper that had captured his imagination. Who, if not Zachary, would waste paper by putting words on it?

“Oh, my God,” Avi cried. “The top page is blank!” He rubbed his fingers together, feeling the grain of the paper between them. “This is priceless!” A blank piece of paper was one of the rarest collectables remaining. If they did not already own the world’s wealth, that fact would have been more meaningful.

Cristina sat silently, allowing him to have his thrill, knowing full well that as soon as he began reading, the thrill would be washed away by the torrent of betrayal and greed—against *them*—spelled out on those pages.

Needing to settle himself down, Avi pulled his chair closer to the desk. Carefully, as if it were a fragile newborn, he wrapped his arms around the stack and slid it closer to him.

One by one, he gently turned every page as if he were afraid that they would disintegrate in his hands.

“Avi, you’re going to have to read faster than that.” Cristina was on her feet, walking to the door. It took her the entirety of the morning and afternoon to skim-read through the entire document. Two or three hours should be sufficient to allow Avi to give the document a good skim. As soon as she decided on the timeframe, she wondered whether he’d be able to walk away once he got started.

Already engrossed in the reading material, Avi hadn’t heard Cristina, nor had he noticed that she had moved away from her desk. Sitting back in his chair, he rested his right elbow on the armrest whilst he read the words on the page he held in his hand. He’d only just started and already his brows had furrowed, and his smile waned.

“Avi.” Again, not hearing Cristina, his eyes continued moving from left to right, over the string of words. “Avi!” She repeated and flicked him on the earlobe with a finger.

“Ouch!” Rubbing his ear, he looked to Cristina, who was standing beside him. “Cristina, what was that for?”

“You were ignoring me.” When she saw she had his attention, she said, “I am stepping out to give you time to read. I’ll be back in two, maybe three hours.” Bending her knees, she leaned forward until her eyes were the same height as his. “Avi, do not think of leaving this office with even one sheet of paper. If you need food or water, my assistant can bring it for you. If you need a bathroom, use mine.”

Avi nodded and went right back to reading.

Wanton greed and scheming were laid bare within the paper’s synopsis. Avi had only gotten through the first paragraph and already his brain was working on overdrive, unpacking the ramifications to his future. It was safe to say that he was already shell-shocked.

Cristina watched him for a moment. She hoped she made the right call by trusting him. Either way, it was too late to worry about it.

Three hours later, Cristina reentered her office and took her seat. Avi was still reading. The dip in his brow undulated as his facial expression travelled between disbelief and anger. The anger dip with the sharp slant to his brow seemed to appear most often.

Cristina cleared her throat a couple of times before Avi noticed her return.

“Cristina, where did you get this?” He held up a fistful of pages, no longer caring about their condition.

Standing behind her desk, Cristina, in her dark, pencil-skirt suit, leaned her back against the window. “An anonymous source left it sometime last night.” Whoever left it had smartly placed the report on her chair and pushed it forward, hiding it from plain sight. “I’m not sure how they got into my office.”

Avi began leafing through the stack of paper. Cristina noticed that he had rabbit-eared a few pages. She wished they had pens or pencils to mark it up, but they went the way of the printer. The last page was numbered two hundred forty-six. When he got to the end, he looked at her. “I have only skimmed it, but do you think it’s a trap? I mean, this seems like something someone would use as propaganda to turn us against Zachary.”

Cristina had already considered that. “There’s a thumb drive that essentially proves its authenticity.”

Cristina opened her top drawer and inserted the nickel-sized thumb drive into a slot in her bracelet. When the hologram screen began projecting, Cristina slowly moved her bracelet-tethered hand to the right to fast forward. “At one-thirty-six p.m. Ah... here.” She turned the hologram 180 degrees and came around to sit in the chair next to Avi.

They watched in silence as Zachary explained the benefits of the neurochip, the control it gave them over the population. Zachary and Lila were in a warehouse of some sort, lined with hundreds of neatly made cots, each had a child standing beside it. They looked like little soldiers, with their eyes straight forward. None moved, not even a twitch of a muscle. Smiling broadly, Lila approached and inspected several of the children. None reacted to her touch or her near proximity.

“Are they humanoids?”

Cristina shook her head. “No. They are neurochipped children. Keep watching.”

“Whose children?”

Again, Cristina shook her head and placed her index finger over her lips. Avi needed to be quiet, watch, and listen. It was not the time for questions.

Zachary was again explaining the merits of a neurochipped population. In one demonstration, he intentionally dropped garbage on the floor. Without a word, the nearest five children stepped forward and collected every piece, taking the trash back with them to their post, and held it in their little hands until Zachary placed a trash can before them. He went through a battery of other demonstrations, showing how the neurochips made people malleable. In the final example, Zachary instructed all of the children to remain standing overnight.

Cristina fast-forwarded the video to the next morning. The children were all still standing. Some were swaying in place from exhaustion, but they were all standing, quietly, with their hands at their sides.

Pride shining through his eyes, Zachary turned to the camera and said, “The neurochip allows us to strip the wearers of their free will.” Avi seemed to have had an apoplectic shock when Zachary uttered those words. Understandable, since both he and Cristina were actively neurochipped. “It precludes them from thinking for themselves.” Avi’s Adam’s apple moved up and down from the sudden dryness Zachary’s words had triggered. “Best of all, when their usefulness runs its course, they will dispose of themselves.”

“Excellent.” Lila was nodding, clearly impressed.

Swallowing again, Avi croaked, “Are... are those children clones? We outlawed human clones!” There was so much packed into that video that Avi’s brain had to work hard to untangle itself from the panic he felt, and think coherently.

“We’ve outlawed human clones, slaughterhouses, population culling... the list goes on. It’s pointless. And don’t get me started on the neurochips! I told you this would happen! I knew he couldn’t be trusted.” Why had she allowed herself to be implanted with a neurochip? Cristina had known better. “Avi, we need to remove our neurochips.” Cristina stood and was pacing back and forth.

“It’s never enough with him, is it?”

Cristina sensed that all of the years of willful blindness had finally caught up to them. “We’ve always known that.” Now they would be on the receiving end of Zachary’s greed.

Avi knew that she was right. They had always known that about Zachary, but in the past, Zachary's avarice had resulted in more wealth for them as a whole, which made population culling, slaughterhouses, and only God knows what else, easier to swallow.

"How can we remove our neurochips without being discovered?" Cristina absentmindedly asked. She was thinking about the children, wondering where they were being held and where they had come from.

"Cristina, we need to find a way, or we'll end up like those kids."

Cristina realized that she wasn't surprised that Avi hadn't spared one thought for the children or their families. It's what they had all become—heartless.

Twenty-Six

August 28, 2046.

The Chilean-Argentine Nest was carved out of the Andean Mountain Range baseline over a span of several decades. The underground structure boasted hundreds of acres of hydroponic farms and vertical gardens, deep waterbeds, and the luxury of tapping into an endless wind energy source that strips away and grinds down the jagged landscape.

A minimalist interior kept a reminiscent hold on the past with artwork-covered walls that depicted tree-covered mountain ranges, radiant blue lakes and rivers, and breathtaking glaciers. In the classrooms, leatherbound and paperbound books, long ago scavenged from Argentina and Chile's abandoned libraries, were housed in dimmed, airtight glass cases. Double sided bookshelves functioned as walls. In another nod to the past, mannequins costumed in denim pants, sweaters, and designer shoes—and other clothing articles from the past—were discreetly interspersed throughout the military residential quarters.

"This segment of the compound was built for the engineering arm of our military." Chase led them through a long, brightly lit hallway. The pride he felt for his home Nest carried through in his cadence and the gleam in his eyes. "As you can see, the housing and food compounds were much bigger than the military compound, though it didn't start that way." Claudia knew that the Argentine-Chilean Nest's original residents were military men and women. It was Entelo's compassionate heart that threw open the door to villagers and military families. "In this area you'll find our command center and a training facility."

Claudia followed Chase and tried to keep from looking behind her for Edward.

Michelle made up the tail. She followed behind Edward into the room and stopped cold, taking in every detail. Rectangular in shape, the room was approximately three hundred by four hundred feet, with wall-mounted technology tiling the blue-green concrete walls. Wow! The floor-to-ceiling walls were mounted with hundreds of oxygen tanks.

When Chase looked back, he saw they needed an explanation. “Oh... the oxygen tank walls. Yes, they exist in every room of our military command center, in case of the break the glass scenario.”

“‘Break the glass’ scenario?” Edward whispered, in a voice that only he could hear. Before he could stop himself, he wondered what would constitute a break the glass emergency. Could things possibly get any worse for mankind?

“In every room?” Michelle whispered to Edward, who shrugged, busy with his own thoughts.

Edward had lobbied hard to be allowed to join them. He had been wanting to see the Argentine-Chilean Nest’s vertical gardens for himself, to see how they managed such a large food production operation, and to perhaps learn something.

“Claudia, you never mentioned how big this place was.”

“Michelle, you don’t listen to a word I say, do you?” Claudia cast a sideways glance at her sister and grinned.

Chase smiled and came to Claudia’s rescue. “Claudia has never been in this part of the Chilean-Argentine Nest. She has only ever been to our satellite training facility.”

Lazador’s Portable Transport Technology allowed Claudia to participate, in person, in mock training missions with the Argentine-Chilean Nest’s Military.

Michelle’s awe was on display. It was surprising to learn that the South American Nest was significantly bigger than Lazador’s Nest. Undeniably, the biggest wow factor was learning they had their own military. At present, there were nearly ten thousand soldiers housed in the military compound, which was located one mile south of the residential Nest. Both were connected by a secret tunnel.

“Well, the Military is our Nest’s origin. Entelo, my father, was a businessman who saw the future. He saw that Argentina’s military was gradually being privatized, piece by piece, contract by contract, outsourced like the rest of the economy.” Chase said, filled

with pride for his father. “Once multinational corporations took ownership of military Global Positioning Satellite networks and command, he knew the future would be bleak. So, he took action, never thinking he would need his own military to defend the nation he founded within his beloved Argentina.” They walked single file through a narrow hallway that could be closed off with a thick metal door. The door had to be a foot in thickness, or more. Letting Michelle and Edward go before her, Claudia paused at the door, and though she tried, she couldn’t budge it. “You see,” Chase continued, “our laws require every man and woman to serve a minimum of five years in the military. Most of our military men and women are lifers.”

Michelle, Claudia, and Edward had their ears tuned to their guide, but their heads tilted upwards in unison. An enormous computer rose from the depths of the Earth before them.

“What is that?” For a second, Claudia thought it might be a futuristic spacecraft of some sort. How far below ground did it reach, she wondered.

The ginormous computer had blinking lights all over: some red, some green, but most were a yellowish hue. The flashing lights kept the eyes busy, fluttering from one blinking light to another. It was spectacular to look at. The thing came together like the pieces of a puzzle not yet set in place. Zigzagging gaps between the pieces housed hanging walkways, making every inch of the cosmic computer accessible.

“We call it Animal.” Standing back, Chase held his head tilted back, looking up to where Animal went through the ceiling. “It is pretty impressive what brilliant minds can do. Animal is nothing but self-learning computing power.”

“What’s it used for?” Claudia asked, as Chase sidled up to stand beside her. Claudia was too fascinated with Animal to notice, but Edward gave him the stink eye.

“For everything, really. At the moment, it’s our attempt at an unbiased jurist and adjudicator, amongst other things.” Michelle and Edward exchanged fascinated looks. They had argued that very morning over new parameters Michelle wanted to introduce to GC. “Aside from military stratagem and research work, Animal helps us determine which laws make sense for our ever-evolving society.” Unaware of the contretemps that GC was causing between Edward and Michelle, it was surprising to Claudia to see that Edward, who didn’t much care for Chase, was listening to him so intently. “Animal is fed each proposed law before implementation. Like your Governing Computer, it games it out.

Aside from adjudicating, it also provides the ten most likely loopholes.” Thousands of biometric-reading cameras covered the military compound. From them, Animal extrapolated behavioral patterns that it used to assist its formation of an unbiased decision, or so they hoped. It was still a work in progress, and he was not allowed to share that last bit of information. “Some decision processes take hours and some take weeks, and most require constant tweaking.” Sticking his hands in his pant pockets, he smiled and said, “One law that comes to mind because it has more unwanted and unintended consequences and loopholes than we like to see, was still implemented. The law will require constant review, re-gaming, and updating of the language. We will see how it plays out.”

That caught Michelle’s attention. “If I may, would you be willing to elaborate?” Michelle could not help her curiosity. Besides, she was selfishly glad to see that they were also struggling with building a customized judicial system for their own Nest. So far, it had been one of the most difficult and complicated things she’s done.

The button-down shirt Claudia tucked into her overalls kept coming out at the sides, making her feel sloppy. After tucking it back in a couple of times, she decided to ignore it. There was only so much time she was willing to spend on her appearance. Besides, a sloppy appearance might be helpful with keeping Chase at bay. At the moment, she wasn’t interested in finding love. Besides, if her sister weren’t so smitten with Edward, Claudia would choose him.

From his few short visits, Chase got the impression that Lazador’s Nest was a smooth machine. Its people seemed to operate and interact seamlessly, which made him loathe to highlight some of their issues. Before long, he decided that sharing information between Nests was for the greater good.

“The issue was in respect to higher education.” Chase said, making his voice louder so that he could be heard over the Command Center’s operations noise. “Our population is split almost evenly when it comes to education. Most agree that schooling for general education should end at fifteen. It’s the higher education that we cannot reach consensus on. Half of our population wants our higher education to be modeled as an Apprenticeship-Master system, while the other half wants traditional education. Animal has determined that the university system is inferior to the Apprenticeship-Master program, and that has caused an uproar amongst our residents.” Nodding and hoping he

hadn't painted the Argentine-Chilean residents as unreasonable, he said, "We'll just have to see how things go, let Animal gather more data and learn about our people and culture, and then re-game the options."

"From that you'll make necessary changes," Michelle said, nodding approvingly. "Sounds like we are having the same struggles. We should share information and compare notes."

Claudia's eyes had glazed over. The conversation no longer interested her. Those decisions belonged to the two people standing beside her, both of whom had made it a ritual to debate and argue their opinions over meals. It was no wonder none were willing to sit at their meal table anymore.

"Apprenticeship-Master learning is ideal, but how do you avoid the risk of your society falling into a caste system?" Everything Lazador's Governing Computer spit out on the subject warned about the high probability of its occurrence.

Chase could see from Edward's eyes that he was hoping for an answer. Unfortunately, he did not have one. "I wouldn't know. I am not on the governing board. Field training is more my thing." Pausing with a broad smile for Claudia, his counterpart at Lazador, he continued, "I think Michelle is right. You should be allowed to collaborate with our governing team. I think it would be beneficial for both sides."

Edward nodded, not appreciating the admiring look Chase had suddenly bestowed on Claudia.

"Okay. Moving on," Claudia said.

Placing a protective hand on the thick glass encasing Animal, Chase seemed to think twice about the next sentence before sharing it. "Initially, Animal was designed for our defense systems. As you know, our roots are military. Our original inhabitants, at least for this location, were to be strictly military personnel and their families. We were to have been a secret force built up to take on the multinationals. But when the world's militaries collapsed and the populations migrated to the SunSafes, it became easy to forget the world above and we got lost in the building of our own nation. The enemy left Chile and Argentina. After that, military buildup took a back seat to the establishment of our own sovereign, underground nation. Since then, Animal's become indispensable."

"So then, why bother to keep an army?"

It seemed like a silly question to Chase, but he indulged Edward with an answer. “Because we didn’t know what the future held. So, we’ve trained and honed our military tactics to fight the unknown enemy.” His eyes seemed to lock on the portable Transport wand Michelle was holding. “Our military is a technologically advanced, lethal machine. If we go head-on against the multinationals, this time we will win.”

“This time?” Edward asked with shocked curiosity.

A bitter smile formed on Chase’s lips. “We have tried taking Zarant down before. But we weren’t prepared,” he said, referring to the portable Transport wand. “But with our combined, improved military capabilities, we will have a real chance of coming out on top.” Before they had the opportunity to ask a follow up question, Chase said, “Let’s move on.” Chase maneuvered his way beside Claudia, and took liberties Edward clearly didn’t appreciate when he placed his hand on the small of her back.

Claudia stepped forward to put space between herself and Chase. Chase smiled and let her be.

“How many floors?” Michelle’s voice came out funny from straining her neck to look straight up. She felt like Jack, in Jack and the Bean Stock, the way Animal sprouted out of the earth and reached beyond the ceiling. Above and below, all she could see was a zigzagging network of hanging metal walkways surrounded by blinking lights, dangling cables, and other hardware that transcended multiple floors. It was like being inside of the Argentine-Chilean Nest’s neuro-center.

“It runs the height of this segment of the Nest.” Once again, he was standing beside Claudia. “Eleven floors.”

“Out of curiosity, how do you ensure corruption and biases are kept out of governing? After all, humans are the ones that wrote the algorithm Animal operates on,” Michelle was expressing genuine curiosity. Lazador’s Nest was struggling with the same question. It may not be a problem today, but it would certainly occur at some point in the Nest’s future. Human nature almost guaranteed it.

Valid question. Chase considered it and gave the best answer he could arrive at. “As we speak, Animal is learning to reconcile the behavior it observes with a data set of desired outcomes we fed it. Zero sum has no place here. Neither does bias. Animal is being used in governing to help mitigate the influence of human nature. We do have a

group of citizens that function as Congressmen and Congresswomen, who review our laws and outcomes, but they are a secondary measure. They assist the process by debating each law's merits on our public media outlet. A record of that debate is then fed into Animal to re-examine its results and make any modifications where it sees fit. After that, Animal provides a new statement on the law that goes back to the House of Representatives. If there are no changes in their arguments, and if the law has a highly gamed favorability rating, it becomes law. The process repeats itself until a law either goes into effect or is rejected."

"Has it ever happened that they disagree with Animal?"

"Not yet." Chase turned and found that Michelle was standing behind him. He did not elaborate.

"An alternative could be to implant the population with neurochips that allow us to control their behavior," Edward said, jokingly.

Clearing her throat, Michelle said, "That's not even funny."

"No. It's not," Claudia concurred. "That's something the multinationals would do."

A group of lab coats were moving around Animal's innards, talking amongst themselves, and taking notes on their floating holographic laptops.

"Chase, has your Nest ever tried to hack into Zaran's server?" Claudia looked to the platform below them, where the engineers were engrossed in their work. "I mean, with this much computing power, I'm assuming you have an incredible team of software engineers who could probably hack their way into anything." There were several more engineers on floors above and below, crawling through Animal like ants in a colony.

"We've probed their servers, but didn't go beyond that...we've been keeping our head down, trying to remain undetected."

Before Claudia even realized it happened, Chase was again standing beside her, his shoulder touching hers. To his satisfaction, Edward noticed that she, once again, moved away. Feeling the jealousy harden his posture, Edward went to take a step towards them just as Michelle took hold of his arm and pulled him in the opposite direction, towards the other door, beyond which several rows of people could be seen working behind desks with holographic screens and keyboards. At the head of the room, against the wall, there were eleven hologram platforms, some tracking weather patterns and others providing

live feeds of different, nondescript places around the world. Three were projecting darkness.

“Look, they’re monitoring the SF SunSafe.” Michelle pointed to the hologram with the One Building protruding beyond the rest of the city’s skyline. She was wondering how they’d gained access to the satellites, until she recalled Gary saying that Entelo absorbed most of Argentina’s remaining scrabble of the National Military as the Government was collapsing and giving way to the multinationals. By then, Entelo’s shadow military had been operating in the foothills of the Andes for several years. “And look, I think that is our Nest! That looks like our old farmhouse, at least where it once stood.” Lazador’s Nest was far below the pile of brick and rusted corrugated metal sheets that had been blown into what used to be their home. It was hard not to notice the vast amount of dirt and debris that had accumulated around the remaining structure.

“It seems even Mother Nature cannot leave well enough alone. If the winds don’t blow it away, time will surely bury it,” there was a sense of distance in Edward’s voice.

Michelle turned to smile at him, but Edward had turned toward Animal. Claudia and Chase were still inside its gut, completely out of sight. Jealously gripped him, and Michelle saw his hands flex at his sides.

“Since we gained access to the old Argentine Military satellites, we began monitoring and mapping the SunSafes.” A soft female voice came from behind them. She motioned towards a hologram that clearly wasn’t the SF SunSafe. Pointy, toothpick-like spires thrust up into the sky, standing together like a thicket of needles. “We suspect something has happened there. This SunSafe in...,” she leaned in to look at the location on the map. “Shanghai. It is literally going Dark before our eyes.”

“Until a couple of days ago,” Chase’s voice took over the narrative, as he and Claudia rejoined the group. The spunky engineer, who’d stepped in to fill Chase’s void, nodded and went back to her task. “Before that it had been completely lit up, as bright as the SF SunSafe.”

“What do you mean by going Dark?” Edward asked Chase, turning to look right at him. Edward had been busy admiring the wall of giant screens. He was discovering that the Argentine-Chilean Nest was more impressive than he could have imagined.

“Just that.” With a slight rotating hand motion, the holographic keyboard hovering over the table turned to him and adjusted itself at the proper height for him to type. Michelle saw the black band around his wrist that, similar to Lazador’s technology, linked him to any piece of equipment in the room with the proper hand gesture and proximity. A few key strokes, and the Shanghai SunSafe was suddenly a brightly lit trove of towers against a night sky. “This was the Shanghai SunSafe at midnight.” A few more key strokes.

There was nothing but darkness on the screen. Moonlight gave a glimpse of the vast structure that was hidden within the darkness—the Shanghai SunSafe.

“What happened?” Closer examination revealed the SunSafe’s silhouette was still there, within the darkness. Claudia looked to Chase for the answer, which Michelle noticed bothered Edward.

Michelle shook her head. Edward was making a fool of himself, and Claudia did not seem to notice. Edward was always too busy giving his attention to Claudia to notice the adoration in Michelle’s eyes when they fell upon him.

“We don’t know.” Chase walked around the hologram. “It has happened before. There was one other recent occurrence.” His brow furrowed in concentration.

“Two. Montreal... and Lebanon,” the spunky girl interjected. She was a couple of desks away, hovering over a keyboard and a privacy-protected hologram table.

“Thank you, Daniella.” Walking towards the Shanghai hologram, Chase elaborated on what they knew. “It was Daniella who spotted the Lebanon anomaly. It followed this same pattern until one day, it never came on again. Same for Montreal. Of course, we didn’t have the Portable Transport Technology that you all have, so we’ve never been able to go and investigate the cause of the Dark-Out. Best case scenario, the people are living in the dark. Worst case—”

“—the Lebanon and Montreal SunSafes have become graveyards,” Michelle said, guessing what Chase was going to say. A hollow distance settled in her eyes. The idea of so many cities simply disappearing...Pompei came to mind. Her mouth tightened and the closest points of her brow moved towards each other. “It seems so incomprehensible.”

“That’s a morbid observation, but we think it is the correct one,” Chase replied, wondering if it was moisture that had turned Michelle’s eyes so glossy.

“You are pale! Clau, what is wrong?” Michelle said, rushing to her sister’s side. She tried to see what Claudia was looking at, but she couldn’t see beyond the Shanghai SunSafe’s darkness.

“What are you seeing?” Edward said, similarly worried about Claudia.

Realizing Michelle had rounded on her, Claudia bit her bottom lip and said, “Steven and Yesenia are, at this very moment, inside of the Shanghai SunSafe.” Before Michelle or Edward could ask her how she knew that, she came forward with the details. “Steven messaged me. A colleague’s daughter came to them. The girl’s father Transported to the Shanghai SunSafe to meet a colleague who *had connections to General Garret*. And now, it appears, they’ve all disappeared.”

“I don’t understand how you –”

“Michelle, I opened the Transport portal for them.”

With a gasp, Michelle said, “You opened a Transport portal from *inside* of the SF SunSafe into the Shanghai SunSafe?”

A sudden pallor came over Edward, but he kept his judgment to himself. There had to be a reason Claudia would do such a thing. An important reason. Opening a Transport portal inside of a SunSafe risked revealing the technology to Zarant Military! What was Claudia thinking!

“Michelle,” Claudia grimaced, uncertain that she’d made the right call by opening that Transport portal for Steven and Yesenia. What’s done cannot be undone, she thought to herself as she said, “Aside from the possible General Garret clue we’re in desperate need of, it also happens that the girl whose father is missing, a close friend of Steven and Yesenia, is about to start a new position at Zarant Industries Headquarters.”

Michelle and Edward’s faces registered understanding and Claudia felt somewhat vindicated. Now, she had to wait and see how her father and Entelo would view her decision.

YESENIA AND STEVEN ARE THERE? RIGHT NOW? Michelle still wasn’t sure Gary and Entelo would accept Claudia’s reasoning, but it made sense to her, especially if this girl actually worked out as a Zarant Industries spy for Lazador.

RIGHT. Claudia’s eyes were locked with her sister’s as they neuro-chatted with each other.

IT COULD BE NOTHING.

THIS DOESN'T LOOK LIKE NOTHING. Their facial expressions changed with the conversation, confusing Chase, who had no idea that a private chat was taking place. Edward shared their neurochip technology and knew what they were doing. He tried to knock on their neurochips to be let into the conversation, but he was summarily ignored.

"I don't think you need to worry, not if he has one of those portable Transport things you all have." It was no secret that Chase hoped to be given a Transport wand of his own. He added, "Perhaps, it's the perfect opportunity for *us*."

Claudia's right eyebrow notched up a bit. "Opportunity?"

"To Transport in there and see what's causing the Dark-Out, and also rescue your friends."

Claudia shook her head. "Not *us*. I will talk to da... Gary," Claudia had to remember that dad was Gary in public circles. "I will talk to Gary and Clarence and we'll go from there."

I WANT TO BE IN ON THAT. Michelle chatted Claudia, who turned and gave her a slight nod of acceptance.

Before Edward could speak, Claudia raised her left hand and said, "Michelle and I." Michelle gave an approving, firm nod in support of Claudia as she spoke. "We will fill Gary and Clarence in on what we just learned about the Shanghai SunSafe, and about Steven and Yesenia. They will tell me who I should loop in." With that, she sent a locator ping and a neurochat message to her father: DAD, WE HAVE A SERIOUS SITUATION. CAN WE MEET?

Twenty-Seven

Inside the Shanghai SunSafe, the food court was brimming with people slogging around in a zombie state, wasting the day away amongst a littered dining hall encased by graffiti and grime. The occupants were not faring much better than their environment. The air they breathed was thick and hung like a cloud of noxious gas that seemed to ferment daily. Residents were skeletal versions of their once thicker selves, left wearing vestiges of the once ubiquitous jumpsuit, now torn and tattered and spackled with filth, sweat, and human excrement.

Rancid body odor mixed with unkept surroundings that released their own pungent fumes, comingling, making a uniquely insidious stench that turned the stomach inside out.

“Stay close.” Steven reached back and took Yesenia’s hand, leading them across the walkway into a larger food court.

Residents gathered in large groups with mothers and their children at the center. Most were barefoot, and most had sheared the legs off their jumpsuits, turning the pants into shorts.

Sweat beads made the skin glisten. Women wore only their braziers or haphazardly made tank tops, and most men sat around shirtless. A set of blue eyes watched Yesenia before being cast downward. Why, she wondered, were they averting their eyes from hers? It seemed odd that no one would talk, or even look at her.

“Ugh.” Yesenia looked away when she saw a young mother—late twenties—sitting near the center of the nearest resident cluster. The woman spooned some blobby muck from a food jar into a toddler’s mouth. The children around her sat hollow-eyed, with distended bellies, eyeing the food jar longingly. Surprisingly, none cried, nor were they

tantrummy. Another spoonful was moving towards the child's mouth when the slimy muck slid off the spoon and landed on her chin, slithering down slowly, very much looking like a slug. At that, Yesenia's stomach launched into full acrobatics. Twisting and turning and lurching, her gut became defiant, insisting she purge all of its contents. Frustratingly, every deep breath she took to quell the nausea made it worse.

"I just don't see how we'll find Roberto in all of this," Steven said, looking away in mutual disgust. "It's so bad here that these people have decided it is better to be miserable together than to be miserable alone." A path seemed to open up for them as they moved through the throngs of people sitting, lying, or standing anywhere there was an inch of room. "People seem to not want to be inside their apartments." *Or want anything to do with us!* The last part he thought to himself as the people in their path scooped, slid, or rolled out of their way. None said one word, nor did they want to look at them as they walked by.

"What is going on here? Look at the food shelves, they are empty. Also, I don't see any Zarant Military guards, and there's always at least one present in the food court." The people were behaving oddly as well, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. "Also, have you noticed the cameras?"

The CCTV cameras were turned upward, facing the ceiling. When Steven first noticed them, it struck him as odd. He'd been trying to puzzle out why they would be facing away from the people, but the deeper they got into the Shanghai SunSafe, the more sense it made—willful blindness. The multinational CEOs wanted deniability of what appeared would be the ultimate genocide of the Shanghai SunSafe population.

"I think..." Steven had to clear his throat. There were at least a couple hundred thousand people that called the Shanghai SunSafe home. Nothing, other than a purge of its population, seemed to explain the dire situation they were witnessing. "I think the multinationals are culling the population."

Is that true? Yesenia took a moment to really look at things. She had been trying not to, to limit the heartache. "Steven, is it me or are they arbitrarily moving out of our way?" Steven took a second look at the people surrounding them. He had not actually had to carve or zigzag a path through the compressed masses. They voluntarily cleared a path

for them. “I do not get it. Why aren’t they angry? This place should be on fire! They should be protesting and putting up a real get-in-your-face fight!”

Steven took a moment before he turned to her and said, “Yesenia, look around... no, not just at the people. Look at the graffiti.” FUCK THE MULTINATIONALS! FUCK THE OLIGARCH CEOs! was scribed on nearly every surface. “There are crumpled protest signs carpeting the floor.” Wherever their eyes landed, the people in their line of sight cast their eyes downward and seemed to shrink. What is that about? “But most especially, do you see the blood on the walls?” A smeared, bloodied handprint that ran downward caught his attention. He could easily visualize a faceless protestor scuffling with Zaran’s Military Police, having been stabbed or beaten, and then being left to die. Steven looked around for the body, but did not see it. He assumed the family must have taken it away. “These people...they put up a solid fight...and by the looks of it, they lost...everything. Look at them. Have you ever seen a sorrier sight?” Again, the people cast their eyes downward whenever Yesenia or Steven looked in their direction.

“What would people in our SunSafe do if they saw any of this?”

“What could they do?” With a shrug, Steven looked at his watch. It was a clear sign of the times, when populations could be wiped from the face of the Earth and there were no consequences for the multinationals. “What I don’t get is why.”

Without skipping a beat, Yesenia tilted her head slightly and said, “The satellites... Zachary never should have been allowed to launch his own.”

Before the Great SunSafe Migration, Zachary’s billionaire status gave him a prestige that allowed him to position himself in a position of power previously reserved for the U.S. Government. Through acquisitions, he acquired control of the largest Satellite fleet outside of the U.S. Military, which granted him breathtaking, unimaginable power over anyone with a cellphone. Government officials were not excluded. Militaries and their movements were not excluded. After successive unchecked launches of hundreds of additional satellites, Zaran’s pinpoint tracking capabilities bested the capabilities of every military in the world—combined. It was through these means that Zachary tracked and moved the pieces of governments that he needed moved. Eventually, he became unstoppable, which made him the ultimate global de facto governing power.

“We’ve got to get moving,” he cut her off. “I think our best chance is the basement mall.” He shook his head. “If we don’t find him there, then I doubt we’ll find him at all.”

It occurred to Yesenia that he didn’t mention anything about helping the people of the Shanghai SunSafe. There had to be a way to save them. A split second later, reality socked it to her: feeding so many people would be an impossible task. Housing them would be yet another. Before that, they would have to be moved to a safe location. A quarter of a million people. The impossibility of it all fell on her like ton of bricks.

Steven saw her fall back and breathe hard. “Are you okay?” When she did not answer, he turned back and saw her nodding. Tears had welled up in her eyes, and she was fighting to keep the floodgates shut.

Steven brushed his hand over her black hair and cupped her chin. “After we find Roberto,” he was trying to remain optimistic, even though he saw the odds were clearly stacked against them, “we’ll Transport to Lazador. Maybe... maybe they’ll be able to do something.” Accepting her silent nod, he kissed her forehead and began leading them towards the retail shops of the underground mall.

Underground malls inside of every SunSafe were a carbon copy of each other. Laddered walkways flanked by gargantuan vending machines that looked like storefronts. Initially, the vending machines carried a range of different products from each other. With time, as the unemployed populations became poorer, every vending machine began to look exactly like the one beside it, until every machine was stocked with the same kind of food jars, and the same unisex jumpsuits.

The dense crowding within the shopping aisles was just as thick as the crowd inside of the food courts. Steven guessed the individual residences had to be completely void of their occupants.

“Okay.” A ripple of shuffling people moved through the sitting masses as they entered the aisle. Looking over the crowd, heads and eyes dove downward. Would they recognize Roberto if they saw him? “You take that side, and check behind any doors you see as well, and I’ll take this side.” It was a big SunSafe, but the people seemed to be concentrating in the underground mall. Finding Roberto would not be fast nor easy, and might prove impossible.

Nodding, they split up and each waded to their respective sides. They did their best to look over every person in their path, which was not made easy by the downward facing residents. Surprisingly, the first door Steven tried was unlocked. Not surprising was how bare it sat. Only empty shelves remained. Not even an empty box.

The shop-sized vending machines that lined both sides of the walkway were also stripped bare of goods. One SalesPoint storefront still had the empty hangers hanging off the conveyer belt, with one hemp jumpsuit just dangling there. Pausing before it, Yesenia looked around—no eyes would dare meet hers—wondering why it was still there. Plenty of the people on the floor around her could use a new jumpsuit. She checked the glass door to the SalesPoint “storefront” and it slid open. Huh!

To the left of the door, a smiling mother sat cradling her baby in her arms. She was one of a multitude of residents with their backs to the empty storefront. It was hard to ignore her sunken eyes and cheeks. And yet, it seemed incongruent that the mother exhibited no signs of despair, not even for her child.

They seem...disconnected. It was a strange word to describe the behavior before her, but it fit. It was as if they had a disconnect somewhere in their brain, almost as if they weren't receiving the message that their lives were in danger. As she reached for the first door she came across, she froze. Could it be? She looked across the walkway for Steven, but he was already far ahead of her. Filing the thought away until they were done searching for Roberto, she made herself move faster.

Downward-cast, gaunt faces were as plentiful as rocks in a riverbed. Several hours into their search, and Roberto was still nowhere to be found.

“Steven.” Yesenia’s feet and heart were aching. She wretched her breakfast hours ago and had actually become accustomed, somewhat, to the stench that permeated from every wall, floor, object, and human body. “Babe,” Yesenia said, walking faster to catch up to him. The tide of people before her parted, opening a path. “We’ve spent the night’s hours in here and... nothing.” Daylight had arrived. “You should have been to work over an hour ago. At the very least, send a message to the Nest. Maybe they will send someone to help us find him.”

Loathe to give up and condemn his friend to such misery, Steven shook his head. “Let us look a bit longer. I do not want to get the Nest involved if we don’t have to.” He was

not sure they'd come. Claudia mentioned they would be in the Argentine-Chilean Nest for the next few days.

Yesenia froze when a hand took hold of her calf. "Roberto?" She whispered when she recognized his face. His lips were cracked and his eyes were rimmed with dark circles. Beside him lay a wafer-thin Indian woman who barely had the strength to look up. "Oh, my God! Steven!"

Roberto and Pavah had been hiding and slowly dying in plain sight. Unable to find a way out of the Shanghai SunSafe, they took refuge amongst the throngs of residents filling the Skywalks. They were starving and dehydrated and had lost nearly all their strength. Both had been certain they would die where they lay.

"Oh, thank God!" Roberto croaked, trying to sit up. He felt weak. "How did you know—"

"Rangel," Steven said, helping him to his feet. He cast a worried glance at his wife who seemed shocked by Roberto's current physical state. He was nearly all bones.

"Pavah!" Roberto said, trying to rouse the woman who had been lying beside him. "We cannot leave her. She is... she's important."

"Okay," Steven said, saving the questions for later. Right now, his focus was getting back to the SF SunSafe. He looked to Yesenia, who nodded.

Ten minutes later, Yesenia was at the closest Zarant Military Transport booth, which was in the lobby just off of the Skywalk. She powered it on, but it would power back off on its own. She gave up and went back to Steven and Roberto.

"I can't get the Military Transport booth to stay on long enough to do anything with it!"

Suddenly Roberto seemed to come to life. "No!" he said, panicked. "You tried a Military Transport booth?"

Confused, Yesenia nodded. "I had to? Everything else is powered off. Those always work."

"No! That is how they have been tracking us. It is likely you've already alerted them that someone tried to turn it on. Everyone here is neurochipped and tethered to the server, so they will know it is me! We must go!"

With a renewed urgency, Roberto helped Pavah to her feet. Together they hobbled as fast as possible towards the closest storage room. None were locked. Steven walked in first, to make sure it was empty of others.

“Steven!” Roberto opened the door and led them in, sitting Pavah on the floor so that she could rest.

Steven had gone into the aisles. There were boxes with untouched food jars on a shelf. He was wondering why no one had taken them, when he saw a problem.

“What’s wrong?” Something had Steven’s attention. “Steven?” Yesenia saw his color drain.

“Stay there. Do not move.” A CCTV camera was pointed exactly to the spot where he stood.

Seeing the blinking red light sitting below the lens, Yesenia nodded and said, “It’s on.” Grimness dictated her facial expression. “Did you see it move towards you?” Maybe no one is on the other side monitoring the feed.”

Steven shook his head. Yesenia breathed a sigh of relief, but the tension returned as soon as Steven said, “I heard it.” Steven saw Roberto over Yesenia’s shoulder, peering at him with the same grim expression his wife wore. “We should get going.” His cadence was all business as he took off his shoe and threw it at the camera. Instead of knocking the thing off, his shoe swallowed the camera and got stuck there.

Left wearing only one shoe, Steven helped Roberto with Pavah as they began retracing their steps, moving as fast as they could, back towards the food court they’d come from.

“Stop!” Steven said, skidding to a halt with his left shoe, and sliding on his sock-covered right foot. Reaching out, he grabbed ahold of Yesenia’s arm before she could run too far past him. “Listen.” Aside from their panting, they heard the sound of boots pounding the pavement—and choked whimpers—moving towards them.

“This way.” Roberto pointed to the left-hand walkway at the junction. “All walkways lead to the food court.”

Maybe it was Yesenia’s imagination, but it sounded as though there were more than just a few Military guards running towards them. Of course, the sound was convoluted with random cries, grunts, and shuffling of moving people, who made sound regardless of whether they tried. “How many... do you think?”

Steven and Roberto shared a look and shook their heads. "Hard to tell."

"Pavah." Her feet began dragging behind them as they ran, each with one of her arms around their neck. Yesenia could not see how she could help, so she ran beside her husband. "Pavah... you have got to wake up. We need you to help us here." Judging by the way the entirety of her weight seemed to suddenly crash on them, Roberto realized she'd passed out.

"That's not good!" Roberto said, his nerves cracking his voice. The cameras were all coming back to life. Thankfully, the people were making it easy for them to keep moving.

"We really need to hurry!" Steven said, trying to pick up speed, but he felt Roberto begin to falter. He should have been surprised to see him moving as fast as he had been, given that he is most likely been starving for over a week. And it showed in his lack of strength and his diminished form. "Yesenia, jump in for Roberto!"

"No!" Panting, and taking a hesitant step, as if he sorely wanted to stop and catch his breath. "I—"

"There is no time to argue! Let me help you, or we all go down."

Roberto stopped arguing and got out of Yesenia's way. In fact, he was grateful. Without Pavah's weight, his malnutrition-afflicted body was barely able to pick up enough energy to keep up.

"We are just two long hallways that way! We can make it!" As they ran, the sea of people parted before them, clearing their path. When Yesenia chanced a glance behind them, she saw the people rising onto their feet and moving forward, with more people coming from behind. They seemed to become activated by the handful of Military guards coming up from the rear. "Look!" Where the crowds parted for them, they seemed to want to run from the Military guards altogether.

"There are so many of them!" Running and stealing the occasional glance at the growing crowd behind them, a hobbling Roberto marveled out loud, "They're pushing the people ahead of them forward, making it more difficult for the guards to get to us."

In their haste, the Military guards were corralling the residents, like a school of dolphins corrals a school of sardines, and remained blind to the agitation they inflicted.

"That will help us, just don't slow down," Steven said, breathing heavily.

They had intended to make a right at the next walkway intersection, but a secondary group of soldiers were coming and bringing forth their own wave of people. Yesenia analyzed their position and realized they had to get moving or they'd be sandwiched, and most likely stampeded, by frightened mobs of people coming at each other.

"Faster!" Steven yelled, taking on most of Pavah's weight and wishing he had a few seconds to spare so that he could take off his other shoe.

Pavah's head was bouncing along, but there was nothing to be done about it. Yesenia chanced another glance behind them and felt a bit of relief when she saw the four roly-poly-shaped men falling behind, but not by enough to take the pressure off.

Reaching back, she took hold of Roberto's hand. He had fallen slightly behind. Seeing him lag, she pulled him in an entirely new direction, damn well nearly yanking his arm right out of its socket. They made a sudden turn into the Skywalk and came to a near halt—a wall of moving people stood between them and the doorway they needed to get through, to get back to where Claudia had Transported them.

"Oh, no!" Yesenia said, as she began to squeeze through the crowd. "We're not going to make it!" The guards were gaining ground on them.

Steven was trying to stop panicking and began strategizing as they pushed and squeezed their way through the confused and panicked crowd—Military guards were coming at them from both the left and the right, crowding the people together. He looked back and saw two of the four Military men hesitate as they entered the crowded Skywalk. Two other guards guarded the exit. They moved forward from the exit with their batons drawn, and began swinging at anyone who got in their way. The crowd responded by opening a path before them, which enabled the Military guards to surround their targets.

Cocky, and with malevolent grins, four Military guards took their time closing in on their prey, forgetting that they too were surrounded by an enemy—starving SunSafe residents.

In a show of power, the largest of the four guards reached for his handcuffs, raised them, and wiggled them tauntingly, unaware that he was agitating the bystander residents.

Yesenia, Steven, Pavah, and Roberto were up against each other's backs—Pavah was still being carried between Yesenia and Steven.

A guard took a baton to a resident's knee when she didn't move out of his way fast enough. Unexpectedly, a wave of hostility infused the air, giving Yesenia an idea. It was a longshot, but if she was right, it was their only chance.

"Enough oppression! Enough repression! Fuck the traitor Zarant Military guards!" Yesenia began chanting the slogan she'd read on the discarded protest signs and graffitied on the Skywalk walls.

With each and every chant the energy of the crowd grew more intense. It was like a pot of water slowly approaching a boiling state. The crowd began jostling, creating an anxious friction that took on a life of its own.

Recognizing the burgeoning mob mentality, Steven joined the chorus as it grew from just them to hundreds of voices: "Enough oppression! Enough repression! Fuck the traitor Zarant Military guards!"

The unison chants played like a symphony to Yesenia's ears, until a shocking, shrill scream cut through the putrid stale air. Instinctively, she whipped around and looked to the source, just in time to see a pudgy arm holding handcuffs being ripped from a body and passed around like a party favor. Shocked and full of fear, the three remaining Military men decided to abandon their orders and run for their lives, but the decision was made too late to spare them. The crowd closed in on them and a gory scene unfolded.

"Move!" Steven screamed at the top of his lungs to make sure he was heard over the chants and cries that filled the once silent SunSafe. It was like the people had suddenly snapped out of their trances, and their repressed anger immediately bubbled up to the surface. Raw anger.

Weary of the crowd, Yesenia became petrified of being crushed. It took her a minute to settle down and regain her thoughts. With a fearful, shaky voice, she began to move slowly, holding tight to Pavah, knowing Steven was holding tight from the other side. "Roberto!" She reached back with her free hand and pulled him along, not willing to let him become swallowed up by the tumultuous crowd. "Follow me." And, in a crouched pose, she led them through the crowd to the periphery of the chaos.

Drenched in sweat, they moved with celerity, pausing only when a chorus of screams drew their attention. A swarm of Military men flooded the walkway. Some turned people around to get a look at their faces then let them go, others grabbed them as they tried to

escape, handcuffed them to the handrail along the Skywalk, and bludgeoned them with their batons on a knee, a head, or an elbow, before moving to the next victim.

“Over there!” One said, pointing right at Steven.

“Time to run!” Steven said, pulling Yesenia by the shirt. She had been entranced by the amount of blood on everything and everyone, wondering if they’d dismembered all four guards.

They were running down a wide-open Skywalk, which explained the crowd swell that took place behind them. A good thing, because the three Military guards chasing after them were in much better shape than the last four.

“We definitely cannot go back to the SF SunSafe, Steven. They have seen your face!” It was a sudden halt. Steven seemed at a loss, wishing he had Lazador’s portable Transport wand.

“Roberto, help me with Pavah.” Yesenia began leading them to a stockroom door. “Steven, you message Claudia as soon as we get into a stock room! Gary’s GPS tracker is still in your pocket, she’ll know where to find us!”

There was no guarantee that anyone would reply, at least not in time to help them, but they had to try. They made a sharp left and Steven tried to follow, but his socked foot slipped on the tiled floor, and he went down. Cursing, he got back up, resumed texting his message, and continued with a hobbled run.

After securing the lock, they began moving empty shelving in front of the door. It wouldn’t stop the Military guards from coming in, but it would buy them time. And they desperately needed more time.

A loud bang made the metal door quiver. They took a reflexive step back, away from the door. Only seconds later, something of substantial size was rammed against the door, giving the middle a solid dent. They took another step back.

Another hard ram of the door made Pavah jolt upright. “What’s going on?” She mumbled incoherently.

It sounded as though the metal door could have splintered into a billion shards of metal, sending them all another giant step back.

“Oh, my God!” Steven said, suddenly startled by the darkness that seemed to swallow them. The last thing he heard before the Transport portal closed was the door bursting open and the crashing noise of empty shelves being barreled over.