



# Will

A Novel

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## This Book Is Dedicated To The Truth And To My Mother

I would also like to thank my sister, my cousin, and my best friend for their support. I'm not naming names, you know who you are.

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## Chapter 1

“Where’d you find him?” Sophia asked with a tone of disapproval. Ray was still leaning over the man on the couch and gaping at him with his mouth open, utterly curious about the stranger he had dragged home. “Well?” Sophia insisted impatiently.

Keeping his gaze fixated on the stranger and not turning towards Sophia, Ray answered “Down by the wall.”

This answer caused Sophia to get a look of absolute indignation on her face. She knew why her boyfriend had brought the stranger home. His intense curiosity was surely a big part of it, but it was more than that. He also had an innate desire to help people as much as he could, especially when he saw someone in a grim predicament. These were some of the attributes she loved about him. She shared similar personal traits. However, she also had a very strong practical side which would lead her to play it safe at times.

“It’s getting late. Maybe we should splash some cold water on his face or something. That ought to wake him up,” she suggested in a mocking manner. Ray turned towards her and gave a disapproving look. This didn’t stop his fireball girlfriend from pressing. “What if he’s dangerous? You know how they are where he comes from.”

A mild look of disbelief came over Ray’s handsomely rugged, light brown face before he lit up with a bemused smile. Raising one of his dark eyebrows, he inquired, “Dangerous? How could he be a danger to us?”

Sophia defiantly answered, “Well, he might try to kill us. That’s the first thing that comes to mind.”

“Are you wearing your body armor?” Ray shot back immediately.

Sophia’s deep blue eyes became more uneasy as she folded her arms. She knew there was a negligible chance that some violent action could be brought to bear on them by the stranger. She just had a feeling that despite the odds being in their favor, something just wasn’t quite right with the whole situation. She tilted her head to the side as she replied, “Of course I’m wearing armor.”

“Ok, so am I, so we’re fine. Please stop worrying,” Ray said in a non-consoling manner.

“Just because he can’t shoot us doesn’t mean he can’t kill us. He could drown us or electrocute us or something,” Sophia argued as she glanced at the dark blue walls of their social room.

Suddenly, Ray’s face lit up with a sly, confident aspect, “Computer, change all walls to color white and illuminate room one hundred and ten percent.” Within a few seconds, the walls miraculously changed from a deep navy color to the brightest white one could imagine. The lights in the room simultaneously increased their luminescence exponentially. The effect was to make the room a blinding atrocity.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sophia shouted as she averted her eyes and swiftly covered them with her arm.

“Just a little wake up juice to expedite the process,” Ray answered with a hint of amusement in his voice.

“So waking this guy up is more important than keeping your vision?” Sophia responded in an incredulous tone with a hint of irony.

Ray was now covering his face with both hands in order to render the blinding beams harmless. "Come on, it's not that bad. Just give it a minute," Ray said.

Suddenly, the lean man in the gray jumpsuit on the couch came alive with a violent jolt. This caused Sophia to automatically retract a bit away from his direction due to her fear and uncertainty.

"Computer, normal illumination, now!" Ray yelled. The lights quickly returned to a more humane level of luminosity. The stranger sat up with a frightened look on his sharply defined face. His green eyes were bugging out and fear was radiating from his posture as if he were a caged animal.

Ray put both of his hands in the air and tried to relieve some of the man's obvious anxiety. "Calm down, relax. We're not going to hurt you." The man was breathing heavily and perspiring a bit. He didn't appear to be physically injured but was overcome by his apparently unwarranted hysteria. He began shaking and cold sweat dripped down his forehead away from his curly light brown hair.

Sophia watched from a safe distance as the two men stared each other in the eyes for a few moments. She had never seen anyone so distraught and was quite sure her husband hadn't either. Such an overwhelming state of panic was unknown in their world. "What could drive a man to such an unnatural state of being?" she wondered as the stare down continued.

Ray decided to break the silence. "Would you like something to drink?"

The man's appearance didn't change a bit. Sophia decided to interject, "Can they talk on that side of the world?"

Ray gave a disapproving glance towards his girlfriend and responded, "Of course they can talk! Don't insult the man!"

Finally, as the man's lips began to quiver, some shaky words came forth from his dry mouth, "Where am I?"

With a sense of relief in his voice, Ray answered, "You're on the other side of the wall."

This caused the man to breathe slightly less rapidly and his eyes quickly came away from Ray's face and began looking more closely at his surroundings. His mind was racing. He tried to piece together in his mind what exactly had happened and how he came to be in his current situation. It was no use. Everything in his mind was fragmented and distorted. The more he tried to focus, the more the fleeting images in his mind became kaleidoscopically undefined. The room he was sitting in, where was it? How did he get here? Who were these people? Was he being interrogated? It didn't look like much of an interrogation room. There was fine, dark furniture all around which gave the room a charming feel. Many colorful works of art decorated the walls in a pleasing manner. Might they kill him? Why did they offer him a drink? People were rarely so welcoming in his world.

After taking a deep breath, the weary stranger spoke again, "Am I being held prisoner?"

This caused Sophia and Ray to exchange confused looks before Ray responded in a serious tone, "Why on Earth would you think that?" The stranger didn't respond. He remained uncomfortably still on the black leather sofa while his gaze was fixed on the floor.

Sophia was now feeling much better now for her own safety as the actions, or lack thereof, of the stranger made her think that he was logically not a threat. Her line of thinking had changed considerably. She was now feeling a strong sympathy for this poor man. She could easily see that he was in a great deal of pain both mentally and emotionally. In a soft tone she inquired, "What's your name?"

"Did you not read the numbers on the back of my neck?" the stranger curtly replied.

This drew a shy tone from the slender blond Sophia, "I meant no disrespect. My apologies."

After an uncomfortable moment of silence the stranger spoke in a subdued fashion while looking Ray in the eyes, "My name is Writer 2001."

Ray got a look of relief on his face because he felt they were finally making some progress. He introduced himself, "I'm Ray, and this is Sophia."

"You don't have numbers?" the stranger asked with a look of shock on his face. Before Ray or Sophia could say anything, the stranger spoke up again with an urgent inflection in his voice, "Are you agents? Where am I? Why have you brought me here?"

Mixed emotions and thoughts began to swirl in the minds of Ray and Sophia. They both were uncertain as to what to say next. This man was obviously fearful, tired, and perhaps delusional and they didn't wish to shock him anymore. However, they were equally perplexed and curious as to why he had asked such questions.

Ray decided to take the initiative and give short, concise answers. He said, "No, we're not agents. You're in our home. I brought you here because you were unconscious and I wanted to help you."

This provoked a fast, harsh reaction from the stranger. He fired back in a raised voice, "Liars! Lies, lies, lies! You must take me for a fool!" Sophia and Ray were truly stunned by this reaction. It was quite remarkable.

It was now Sophia's turn to reason with the man. As she took a step towards Ray and the stranger she inquired directly in a soft tone, "Why would we lie?"

This only infuriated the stranger more, replying, "Why would people lie? Are you insane? A more appropriate question would be, why would people not lie?" There was a chilly silence before the stranger raised his voice again, "I get it. I get it! You are agents of the state! You're trying to make me say something I'm not supposed to say and then you'll have all the evidence you need! I won't talk anymore, that's what I say! You can't make me talk! Do you hear me?"

Ray was now getting a bit upset at the paranoid accusations spewing forth from the stranger. He decided to be blunt. "The state doesn't exist here."

The stranger sat silent for a moment while he absorbed the gravity of Ray's words. The state not exist? How was that possible? Now he was starting to believe that he was in a madhouse or some form of cruel psychological experiment. Or maybe he was dead and it was all a lucid dream. He then started laughing. It was one of those laughs of disbelief when something incredibly terrible happens and a person doesn't quite know how to react, so they just laugh like a madman.

"The state, not exist? Now I know you're deranged," he said while still laughing incredulously. "You might as well tell me that the sun doesn't exist either, or the moon, or water!"

This irrational fear and the incoherent rambling it was causing this man to exhibit astonished Ray and Sophia. Sure, fear existed in their world, but not like this. They felt sorry for the man while at the same time a fascinating curiosity. They knew some stories from the other side of the world, most of which were nearly unbelievable. They were aware that fear was a powerful enemy of freedom and a potent ally of despotism. However, seeing this man acting this way out of sheer terror made quite a palpable representation before their eyes. It was both compassion and curiosity which brought forth the next remark from Ray.

"You're on the other side of world. They can't hurt you. May I ask how you got past the wall? I've never known anyone from your side of the world."

The stranger seemed to reflect on the question for a moment.

"I don't remember," he replied in a somber tone. The look on the stranger's face then grew suspicious. "Do you know of my side of the world?" he inquired.

Ray felt some relief that the man was making some effort to speak in a more civilized manner. He answered, "Yes, we've heard stories from various people, friends, acquaintances, and so forth, about some of what goes on in your world."

This drew an inflamed response from the stranger.

"Spies! You've been spying on us!" he shouted.

"You can view it as you wish. However, the trips have been few and far between. It is more out of curiosity than anything else. There are no nefarious ends in mind, I can assure you. Many individuals on this side of the world hold out hope that one day we can have contact with your side," Ray said with a twinge of indignation in his voice.

"Why can't we have contact now?" the stranger asked in an angry tone.

Ray and his girlfriend shared an amused glance before Sophia responded.

"Quite frankly, most of us are afraid of people from your side."

This caused quite a look of shock on the stranger's face. He couldn't comprehend how his people could be considered threatening. They were decent, hard-working people, after all. The next question came quite naturally to him.

"Why are you afraid of us?"

The answer came just as easily to Sophia and she replied, "Because your entire society is organized around and dictated by a monopoly of systematized violence."

This was followed by an eerie and uncomfortable silence. The young couple didn't know how the stranger would react and the stranger did not know how to react. It seemed quite an absurdity to the stranger. A monopoly of violence? Whatever did this poor girl mean? His people were free and brave, always making progress towards a better life. Yes, there was some injustice in his world, but that was an unfortunate necessity for the greater good. Yes, there was some violence, but it was necessary for freedom. Who were these strangers to judge his people? The very thought made him have an impulse of rage. How dare they criticize! These deep inner thoughts had the outward effect of making his face twist and contort in a most disturbing way. Just as Ray was about to speak, the stranger raised his voice.

"I don't understand," was all that came out despite all of the swirling thoughts in his head.

"Nearly everyone on this side of the world avoids violence. That's why we avoid contact with your people. We're not afraid, we just don't want any possibility of violence in our lives," Ray said in a sympathetic tone.

The stranger sat and stared at the floor with his mouth hanging open. He didn't know what to think or what to feel. All he knew was that he was confused, tired, and had one splitting headache.

"You look exhausted. Would you like to rest?" Sophia offered with a compassionate look on her face. She genuinely felt for him. Her fear of him had dissipated.

"I have no money," the stranger sadly replied.

"We don't want any compensation. You can stay here on the couch. In the morning you can join us for breakfast if you like," Ray offered.

"And if I'm not here in the morning, what then?" the stranger asked in a skeptical manner.

"We would regret not speaking with you more, but would wish you the best," Ray replied calmly and sincerely. Ray and Sophia left the room uncertain as to what would transpire in the near future. They felt good knowing that they had done their best to help the poor man.

## Chapter 2

The next morning, bright sunshine illuminated Ray and Sophia's bedroom. They remained lying next to each other for a few moments, enjoying the warmth and radiance of the bountiful liquid light. They were both thinking the same thing. Would the stranger still be there? If so, what would happen next? He was so peculiar. Would he want to go home immediately? Would he be curious about the other side of the world? Ray was the first to speak, "Do you think he's still here?"

After pondering for a moment, Sophia replied, "I'm not sure, but I have a feeling that he is." Ray then asked, "If he is, what will we do?" Sophia playfully questioned back, "I dunno, can we keep him, pa?"

This drew a lighthearted grin and chuckle from Ray and he yelled back, "He's not a dog!" as he lightly bounced a pillow off her head. Ray continued, "All right, I'm going to check and see if he's still around. Maybe you can make some coffee?" "Maybe," she responded with a smirk. Ray rolled his eyes and walked out.

Ray slowly made his way around the spacious house. He looked first in the social room where the stranger was last seen on the leather sofa. Ray had the notion to call out the stranger's name in order to draw a response. However, something just didn't feel right about calling a sentient being by a number such as 2001. He thought that if the stranger were still around then he might want to take a name for himself.

As he was walking down a wide corridor towards the tech room a voice came from behind, "You have a marvelous home. You must be quite an important member of your society."

Ray recognized the stranger's voice and turned around. Ray greeted him with a warm smile and replied, "Good morning! I'm happy you're here. Did you sleep well?"

The stranger's eyes narrowed and he answered, "No, to be honest, I was tossing and turning quite a bit. I find it difficult to sleep in strange places. I've been up for quite some time looking around your opulent home."

This caught Ray a bit off guard. "Opulent?" he said with a surprised tone. "Perhaps you could tell me what leads you to call it opulent. Would you like some breakfast?" The stranger's face showed signs of approval and nodded yes. Ray then showed him towards the kitchen and dining area.

When they entered the kitchen Sophia was busy making breakfast. "Good morning," she greeted the stranger with a smile. "I'm making scrambled eggs, chocolate pancakes, and last, but not least, coffee."

This made the stranger have a look of mild shock on his face and he said, "Coffee?" as if he wasn't aware of such a thing's existence. Sophia, confused by his reaction, asked "Do you like coffee?" "I don't know, I've never tried it," came the response. Ray and Sophia exchanged a puzzled look. "You've never tried coffee? Why not?" asked Ray. "It's not legal where I'm from," the stranger said in a proud tone, as if there was something righteous in denying physical pleasures from oneself.

"Would you like a cup?" Sophia offered.

"Oh no, I'm afraid not. You never know who's watching, you know," the stranger replied as his eyes shifted around as if looking for surveillance cameras. This brought out a smile of disbelief from Ray. "No one is watching us, I can assure you."

Sophia took a clear shiny glass plate and put a generous portion of scrambled eggs on it. She set it on a granite counter top near the stranger. "There you go, fresh from the farm. Are you sure you don't want any coffee?"

Glancing around a bit nervously the stranger replied in a low tone, "Well, it does smell delightful. Perhaps I'll try just a bit."

Sophia gave Ray his breakfast and grabbed a plate for herself. "Come on, let's sit at the dining table. You do sit when you eat where you come from, right?" Sophia asked in a mocking tone. Ray sighed and rolled his eyes at her.

It was an absolutely sparkling day outside and a torrent of sunshine was splashing into the dining room from a glass wall behind the table. Outside could be seen low mountains and a great wealth of natural beauty. In various areas there were sloping fields of crops of all sorts. Far off in the distance, another house could be seen. Taking notice of this, the stranger asked, "Is that your nearest neighbor, way out there?"

"Yeah, we like to have a lot of space. Most people on this side of the world live in the countryside."

The stranger, coming from a place where everyone lived in overcrowded cities, thought this a bit odd. "Everyone lives in cities in my world. This is my first time outside the city."

Ray smiled and said, "I can't imagine never being in the countryside. I can't imagine living without coffee, either. Go ahead and give it a shot." The stranger picked up the steaming cup of dark goodness and took a whiff. "Go ahead, before it gets cold," Sophia prodded him. He took a small sip and within a microsecond his face began to light up. Ray smiled and said, "Looks like we have another fiend in the making."

The stranger eagerly took a couple more sips and then got a puzzled look on his face. "Why would such a fantastic drink be illegal?" he spoke with intense curiosity.

Sophia chimed in quickly, "Why would anything a person does be illegal, if it doesn't harm another?" This puzzled the stranger even more.

"That's simple," Ray confidently explained with a mouthful of pancake, "For power." The stranger thought about this for a moment before he announced his ultimate conclusion, "I don't understand." "I have a feeling you will, someday," Sophia assured him.

Suddenly, there was a loud, fast, and furious knock at the front door. A look of terror seized the stranger's face. He was desperately afraid of what would happen if his government found him! He was ingesting contraband! Ray and Sophia gave each other a glance of uncertainty. After a second, Sophia's face lit up as she remembered, "I completely forgot that Jovius was coming over for breakfast!"

She quickly got up from her chair and started walking towards the front door, but before she could get out of the room, Ray stopped her. "Wait, what about our new friend here?"

"What about him?" Sophia responded, a bit puzzled.

"Well," argued Ray, "Jovius can be a bit, how shall I put this, overbearing, the first time you meet him. Especially for someone who's not from here. Know what I mean?"

Sophia actually found this to be quite preposterous. Everyone loved Jovius! After all, he had that name because he was so jovial! It was a safe bet that he'd hit it off

with the stranger for sure, maybe even lighten the mood a little. “It’ll be fine! You worry too much, Ray!” Before Ray could say anymore, she turned her back and was walking away. Another fast and furious knock came before she made it to the door.

She flung the door open and there was Jovius. He was tall with dark skin and narrow eyes. He wore canary yellow sneakers, old green jeans about a size too short, a bright red polo shirt, and a powder blue baseball cap. He was truly a sight to behold. With an eyebrow raised and a smirk on his face he asked, “What happened? You get lost?” with a twinge of sarcasm in his voice.

Sophia, never to back down from a battle of wits, shot back, “Did you wash your art supplies with your clothes again?” They both had a good chuckle as Jovius made his way in. “What’s with your knock, anyway?” Sophia jokingly demanded to know.

“I have a different knock for everyone,” he explained, “I know you and Ray are some lazy asses that like to sleep all day, so I knock as loud and obnoxious as possible.”

As they came into the dining area, Jovius spotted the newcomer and approached him with a welcoming smile. The stranger maintained a tense look on his face. “Hey stranger! I’m Jovius. Did these two sucker you into cooking for them?” There was no reaction from the stranger.

Ray took the opportunity to jump in, “Jovius, this is a newcomer from the other side of the wall,”

A look of surprise and amusement came over Jovius’ face. He then burst into uproarious laughter which nearly shook the room. “Ok, jokes on Jove, right? You guys are good, that’s real original, trying to catch me off guard before I have my breakfast, right?”

The stranger, much to Ray and Sophia’s surprise, spoke up, and asked in all seriousness, “Are you a clown?” This made Ray and Sophia burst into laughter as well. Now all three were laughing and the stranger just sat there with a confused look on his face.

“Yes, I’m the greatest clown this side of the planet, but only on Mondays!” Jovius bellowed in a smooth tone.

Ray was the first to calm a bit. “But really, Jovius, he came from the other side. I found him last night,” he spoke as his laughter dissipated.

Jovius raised a curious eyebrow and looked over the stranger for a moment before speaking. With a big grin he greeted the stranger, “My name is Jovius, purveyor of perplexing parodies and the liquid spirit of jest.” The stranger looked quite uncertain as to what to make of this odd fellow and just stood staring with his mouth gaping open. Tired of waiting for a response from the stranger, Jovius spoke up, “I know I’m good looking, but you really shouldn’t stare.” Then he turned to Ray, “So what’s his name?”

“Don’t talk like he’s not in the room. He can hear you, ya know,” Sophia chimed in before Ray could respond.

“Well, can he talk?” Jovius bluntly asked.

“Of course he can talk,” Ray said with an offended tone. “You probably just took his breath away. You tend to have that effect on people,” Sophia said with a wry grin.

“Ok, so can one of you tell me his name, or should I just call him guy?” Ray sighed and said, “He doesn’t have a name.”

"Guy it is! I dub thee Guy!" Jovius exclaimed.

Ray sighed again, "He has a number, 2001."

This delighted Jovius and he jubilated, "2001! How fantastic! A year of marvelous vintage!"

Sophia looked at the stranger who was becoming more uneasy by the minute. "Well, you gotta have a name! Let's name him!" exclaimed Jovius. This upset Ray a bit. "He's not a dog, Jovius! We can't just name him."

The stranger started to become a little offended and joined in, "You can call me 2001. What's wrong with that?" Ray tried to console the stranger, "Nothing, there's nothing wrong with it. We're just not used to calling people numbers, that's all."

Jovius raised a finger and confidently declared, "I'll call you Vintage! How about that? That's almost a fine a name as Jovius, I say! How about it, Vintage?"

The stranger frowned and replied, "I suppose if it makes you feel better, you can call me Vintage, but I don't see the point. It's not logical."

This drew a fantastic response from Jovius. His face lit up and called out, "Logical! The man from the warring world wants to speak of logic! I can't help but find this deliciously ironic!" While continuing to laugh heartily he continued, "A fine cup of liquid black goodness is in order! I see a stimulating river of words coming forth, and stimulating words deserve the finest of stimulants to match! Agreed?"

Sophia chuckled and shaking her head said, "Four cups of coffee, coming right up." Sophia went to the kitchen to get the coffee while Jovius and Ray took a seat at the dark brown dining table.

"So you want to speak of logic, Vintage?" The stranger had no such inclination. He was still trying to figure out how he got to where he was. More importantly, he wanted to know how he could get back home. At this point, however, he had no choice but to speak with these peculiar people. Perhaps they could assist him in some way of getting home. After all, they were capable of flying outside the confines of the planet, so surely it would be more than simple enough to return him to the other side of the planet. In the meantime, he thought it best to enjoy some coffee and get his head straight for a couple of days before making any plans.

"I have no such wish to speak of logic with you. No one living in chaos outside of law can teach me a thing about logic," the stranger explained with a slightly self-satisfied smirk on his face.

This caused a half startled, half amused look to come across Ray's face. Jovius was also shocked, and in a mockingly sympathetic tone he cried, "Chaos! We're living in chaos!" Turning to Ray he continued, "Ray, did you know we were living in chaos?" Ray shook his head and wryly responded, "Surely, the definition of chaos must be remarkably different on the other side of the world." Sophia was now approaching the table and Jovius turned to her. "Did you know we were living in chaos, Sophia? Did you get that memo?" Sophia replied, "I must've been out sick that day. I received no such memo."

As Sophia went to retrieve the other two cups of coffee, Jovius turned back to the stranger. "I would love to hear the evidence of how we are living in chaos. Please enlighten us, sweet Vintage!"

The stranger responded with contempt, "It is well known that on your side of the world chaos rules the day."

Ray thought this interesting and inquired, "How did you come to know about the supposed chaos in which we live?"

The stranger thought such a question to be ludicrous but answered it just the same. "Where I come from," he calmly spoke with a hint of condescension, "We learn in school how it is on your side of the world, the suffering, the chaos, and all sorts of other unpleasant aspects of your culture."

Sophia, Ray, and Jovius all laughed a bit, but took great pains to not laugh too much, so as not to be rude to their guest. Having learned the art of intellectual self-defense, it was apparent that the stranger's words were quite fallacious and thus a sort of abbreviated tragic comedy. The three knew that technology did not exist on the stranger's side of the world in order to visit or gather information about their side. Due to this bit of knowledge, it was obvious that any information taught in the schools of which the stranger spoke was pure propaganda and had no basis in reality.

Sophia calmly asked, "Do people from your side travel here often?"

The stranger replied, "Of course not, I believe I am the first successful attempt." Sophia brought forth another simple question, "And do you gather information about this side in some covert manner that I am unaware of?"

The stranger thought for a moment then said, "I don't know of any such project, but there is much of the government which I confess I don't know about. Secrecy is necessary for security, of course."

Jovius couldn't help but burst into uproarious laughter at this. "Dear Sophia, allow me to continue the line of logic. May I please?" he begged as he took a sip of the steaming black goodness.

"Ok, but please keep it cordial. It's his first day here, remember," Sophia relented.

"My marvelous Vintage, it is true that nobody travels here to gather information from your side," he began.

"That's right," Vintage confirmed.

"And you have no other means of gathering information about the ways of life here?"

"Not that I'm aware of," came the reply of Vintage.

He continued, "Are there some type of historical texts which the schools might reference for educational purposes?"

"We have no historical record of your side, at least that I'm aware of," came the reply.

"Then how, in the name of truth, Vintage, does the information come to be which is taught in your schools?" he asked with an involuntary giggle.

The stranger reflected for a moment and became more and more puzzled by the second. Then came his response, "I don't know." The room was silent. The stranger was confused. "There must be some explanation," he said with a bit of uneasiness in his voice.

"Vintage, it would be my pleasure to offer a most logical explanation. Would you mind?" Jovius pleaded. The stranger fixed his gaze on Jovius as if waiting for him to continue, which Jovius happily obliged.

Jovius went on with another question, "May I ask who operates the schools?"

The stranger responded indignantly, "The governments do, of course," as if that was the only way in which schools could exist.

"It appears then, Vintage, that the governments of your world are spreading propaganda in the schools against the ways of life in which I and millions of other individuals on this side adhere to. Not only adhere to, but relish, I might add."

The stranger gave a doubtful laugh. Propaganda? His government didn't use such a vile thing, to be sure. It was only the enemies of freedom who used propaganda. How fantastically preposterous a suggestion coming from this clown named Jovius!

"Just for the sake of argument," the stranger began, "Let us suppose that what you say is true, that my own government uses propaganda in the schools. Why would my government want me and millions of others to believe that there is chaos on the other side of the world? To what end? For what purpose?"

Ray beat Jovius to the punch with a quick reply, "That's a marvelous question, stranger! May I offer a logical answer?" "By all means," the stranger replied with a sense of urgency in his voice. He was beginning to think that perhaps his maiden voyage to the other side of the world would be quite fortuitous in the fact that it presented an opportunity. It would be a chance to teach the wonders of government to the chaotic hordes across the world! This was crossing the stranger's mind when Ray responded.

"The people who masquerade as some benevolent force called 'government' retain their power by convincing you that you need to be ruled."

The stranger sat still for a moment while the others eagerly awaited his response. It was clear to the others that what they were discussing was of monumental importance, for it was something easily understood by them. It had been understood by most people in their world for hundreds of years. They all had the feeling, however, that the stranger didn't grasp the gravity nor the validity of the arguments. That didn't stop them from continuing the path of the conversation. Sophia was the first to speak.

"May I ask you a question?"

"On one condition," he said with a straight face, "that I may have another cup of your wonderful coffee." Ray stood up and said, "I'll do the honors," as he made his way to the kitchen.

Sophia looked at the stranger and inquired, "Do you know the meaning of the verb school?" The stranger thought this was a rather insulting question at first, but upon reflection, he found that no clear definition came to mind. He began to turn a bit red and, taking notice of this, Sophia tried to alleviate his embarrassment. "It's ok. Lots of people use words and never know the exact meaning or that it even has multiple definitions." "One meaning of the word school," she continued, "Is to discipline or control."

Jovius couldn't contain himself and interrupted, "I might also add that it can be used in a derogatory manner. It has a meaning to defeat, put down, or humiliate."

"I was just about to go there, but thanks for your input," she said with a sigh and a twisted smile. Turning back to the stranger she continued. "However, education is different. One Latin root word for education is 'educere', which means 'to draw out powers of the mind'. It can also mean an enlightening experience."

The stranger was listening intently but had a look of misunderstanding colored all over his thin face. Ray came back and set down a fresh cup of coffee in front of the stranger. "Did I miss anything?" Ray asked.

"Nothing you don't already know," Jovius claimed.

"Where you come from, education is tightly controlled and regimented, is that right?" Sophia asked the stranger.

"I suppose you could say that," he replied.

Sophia explained, "In our way of life, children are usually educated at home, by the parents. Children acquire knowledge, mostly on their own, by asking questions and experimentation, with the parents acting as guides, and I use that term loosely. In your world, children are schooled in government facilities where they are disciplined and controlled. They memorize tightly controlled information to serve the regimented system."

The stranger was puzzled by many things at this moment, but one stood out more than the rest. "What are parents?" was his shocking question.

Everyone but the stranger slapped hand to forehead in disbelief and started laughing out of shock. Jovius was the first to muster words. "Please tell me that's a joke! Perhaps you can go with me to my next performance? Please, dear Vintage, enlighten us as to how children are cared for and who cares for them in your land of freedom and order!" he shouted with ironic delight.

Ray noticed that the stranger was beginning to grow weary of the laughter which he no doubt felt was at his expense. He took the initiative and said, "Please, please, take it easy Jovius. You're making our guest most uncomfortable."

The stranger then spoke with a stern voice, "Don't worry, Ray. I know it is ignorance from which this laughter springs."

This caused Jovius again to explode into a fit of cackling and slapping the table with unfettered delight. Managing to squeeze some words between his cackles, "We are ignorant! We have no war, and yet we are ignorant!"

"May I answer the question?" the stranger raised his voice. After a pause, he continued "We find it more efficient to have experts care for children. Leaving such an important task to just anyone, as it was in the past, can have the most undesirable consequences."

Jovius calmed himself and replied, "Good show, Vintage. A remarkable show! Now, I will answer your question. Parents are the people who conceive, care for, and educate the child. Such a complex and wondrous thing as raising children should not be summed up in such an abbreviated manner, but it will suffice for the moment."

The sun was now much higher in the sky and was producing blinding beams in the dining area. Ray was taking the brunt of the beams and suggested, "I think the sun is nearly as overbearing as our good chum Jovius. Time to give ourselves some shade, agreed?"

Sophia agreed and added in a mocking tone, "Yes, please, and also if you can tame Jovius in some way." Ray raised an eyebrow and responded, "I'm not a miracle worker, my dear." He then commanded, "Computer, tint windows by twenty-five percent." In an instant, the wall-sized window overlooking the luscious landscape darkened a bit and the sun's rays were dampened to a manageable level.

The stranger's eyes lit up with wonder at the fantastic display of technology. "I will give you credit," he spoke with a sense of wonder, "That the technology you have seems to be on a higher level than our own."

Jovius thought this was quite an understatement due to the fact that the system of the other side of the world couldn't produce a vehicle to leave Earth's atmosphere. Just as Jovius was about to make a mildly insulting remark about the stranger's world, Ray cut him short. "Don't do it, Jovius. Please don't do it." Jovius gave a frown of mockery and didn't say a word.

The stranger asked, "I'm curious as to what type of work you all do. It's mid-morning and it seems you have no responsibilities to attend to." "We do all types of work," Sophia stated bluntly. The stranger was a bit muddled by this answer and restated his question, "What I mean is, what type of work do you do to support yourselves? Are you engineers, doctors, or in the case of Jovius, a semi-professional clown?"

Jovius' face lit up and he exclaimed, "Oh, he does have a sense of humor! He's not a robot!"

Ray took it upon himself to explain how occupations generally worked on their side of the world. "In order to keep the explanation simple," he declared, "All I'll say is that most people that we know do multiple types of work."

This startled the stranger as he inquired, "Even the clown here? What more could he possibly do?"

Everyone had a good laugh at Jovius' expense. Sophia was able to muster an explanation. "Jovius is not only an entertainer, but he also transports goods when he travels to do his shows." Jovius was looking at Sophia with an expectant look as Sophia was intentionally withholding more information. She smiled and glanced at Jovius.

He couldn't bear it and pleaded, "And? What more? Don't hold back in praising me, I say!" he jested.

Sophia complied, "And he is one of the water providers of our local area."

This made the stranger blush and giggle from disbelief. "How can anyone's water supply be entrusted to this freak of many colors? It's too much, please, no more jokes!"

Jovius laughed and defended himself, "Surely, Vintage, you mustn't be so snide, energy you waste trying to hurt my pride."

"No really," Ray joined in, "He helps supply water to quite a few people, including us. He helps us irrigate our farm."

"That doesn't speak well for your society, you realize that, right?" quipped the stranger.

"Perhaps not," agreed Ray with a playful grin. "I'm glad to see that you're becoming comfortable here, as opposed to your initial reactions and behavior."

The stranger nodded his head in agreement as he spoke. "Yes, I feel much better now. Please understand that it was a nerve racking experience to wake up in a strange place and not remember how you got there."

Jovius exclaimed, "Yes, the same happens to me some days when I imbibe liquid bread in overzealous ways."

Sophia rolled her eyes at this and said, "Sure, Jovius, I'm sure it's just the same." Ray thought this might be a good time to ask more about the stranger and how he had arrived across the wall.

"Please tell me stranger, what do you remember about coming here?" "As I told you last night, I remember nothing," came the retort.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Ray persisted.

The stranger thought for a moment. Everything was still so fuzzy and disconnected. His last clear memory was working at his desk at work. What was he working on? What was he writing? Who was the last person he saw? Where did he go after he finished his work? Everything was too black. Perhaps in time he would recover his memories of the recent happenings. "The last thing I remember was sitting at my desk working at the office," came the answer with a shrug.

"What type of work do you do?" Ray asked.

"I write for a newspaper. The last thing I recall is writing an article for the paper," the stranger struggled to verbalize the cloudy experience.

"You don't remember leaving your office?" asked Sophia.

"No, nothing," he replied curtly.

Ray wanted to dig a little deeper. "Do you know of any government programs to try and cross the wall?"

"None that I'm aware of," came the answer.

"That doesn't mean they're not trying," Sophia spoke with suspicion in her voice. Jovius laughed and cried, "Thank you little miss obviousness!"

Ray thoughtfully said, "Well, you're here, stranger, so they've succeeded. Whoever 'they' are."

Jovius had a very contemplative expression on his face for a moment before he made a suggestion. "Well, I guess there's only one thing left to do, Vintage."

The stranger's voice oozed curiosity, "Yes, Jovius, what's that you have in mind?"

"I suppose we'll just have to cut you up into little pieces and send you back. Maybe with a nice greeting card or something. Flowers, too, might be a nice touch," Jovius suggested in all seriousness. The stranger gasped as a horrified countenance at once seized his face. Jovius thought this to be of the highest jocularity as he burst into a fit of outrageous laughter.

Sophia instantly tried to calm the stranger while simultaneously slapping Jovius disapprovingly on the shoulder. "He's joking! Jovius, you're terrible!"

Trying to quickly change direction away from the horrid joke, Ray jumped in. "So what type of writing do you do? And who for?"

The stranger answered while keeping a watchful eye on Jovius. "I write about current events for the Free State Herald."

"I'm getting a crazy idea," Jovius interjected.

"I think we've heard enough of your crazy ideas for one day," Sophia objected.

"I'm hitting the road tomorrow to do some shows. Perhaps old Vintage here would like to come along and see our world in a wider scope," he suggested.

Ray laughed at the audacity of Jovius. "A moment ago, you're cutting him to bits, and now you want to take him on a grand tour. You are a real piece of work, Jovius, I'll give you that."

The stranger had a ponderous look about him. He thought maybe it would do him some good to see the other side of the world and see their way of life. Could it be true that chaos did not rule their days? Doubtful, but seeing is believing.

"I think I'd like to see more of your world. I don't know how I'd pay my way, though."

"Don't worry," Jovius assured him, "You can earn your keep by pulling the donkey cart. The donkeys could use a day off."

"Stop it, Jovius!" Sophia yelled with a laugh.

With a spry look on his face Ray said, "I've got an even crazier idea. How about we all go! Should be an interesting trip, right? Besides, someone really ought to babysit Jovius and look out for Mr. Vintage here."

Sophia threw up her hands, smiled, and exclaimed, "You can't argue with that logic! Road trip it is!"

## Chapter 3

“Coffee?” offered the sharp-dressed graying specimen.

“Yes, please. It’s been a very difficult week,” came the tired response from the handsome young man in black.

The well-dressed fellow coldly said, “We don’t pay you to hear your complaints. A simple yes or no is all that’s necessary from you.”

“Yes, sir,” came the meek response.

“Servant Six, go fetch two piping hot coffees at once!” commanded the large middle aged man. A stout, straight-faced little servant scurried out of the room immediately.

“Now, down to business,” began the older one with a raised eyebrow, “Is the operation thus far successful?”

The younger proudly answered, “Yes, sir. Up to this point, everything is running smoothly.”

“And the access codes?” the gruff and gray fellow anxiously inquired with a commanding tone.

“Yes, sir,” came the obedient reply. He reached into his black leather jacket but then, eying the return of the servant, paused. Seeing this, the other man smirked and said, “Don’t worry about him. He’s absolutely clueless. Just a poor servant.”

The servant set the coffee in front of the men on the dark table between them and walked off without so much as a flinch. The youthful one pulled an envelope from his pocket and set it in front of his boss. “Everything you need is in there. I suggest after you have access that you burn it up for security’s sake,” he said as he took a sip of coffee.

Annoyed, the boss snapped at his subordinate, “The day I need advice from you is a sad day for the Democratic Free State.”

The cold, stern man straightened his tie and slowly opened the envelope. He pulled out one crisp sheet, analyzed it carefully, then took a small machine out of his pocket. On the machine he touched a screen and punched in the information from the sheet. Upon seeing what he had been waiting for, he looked up at the agent and smiled a rye smile. “Very well, you may go now.”

Taking a deep breath, the subordinate said cautiously, “I was told that I would receive payment upon delivery.”

With narrow eyes and a malicious scowl, the boss brusquely replied, “You’ll receive payment when we decide to pay you. There is a protocol and it will be followed, regardless of whatever false hopes you have harbored.”

Standing up and nodding respectfully, the young order follower decided not to press the issue. He walked out quickly without another word.

Immediately, the stern man rose and went briskly towards a double thick steel door and had his tongue scanned by a blue lens in the wall. The giant shiny doors slowly parted ways for the dark presence.

Upon entering, a group of men of similar age, build, and stature, seated at an enormous glass oval conference table, turned their heads towards their partner. The first to greet Mr. Galvin Creedy, head of Liberty Corporation, was his immediate boss, John Rockateller, head of Liberty Bank.

"He was a sassy little tool, wasn't he?" referring to the young intel agent who had just departed, "Asking for his money like that. How preposterous!" This drew some half cocked smiles from the heartless crowd.

John's brother, Darius Rockateller, head of Point of Light Energy, spoke next. "I trust the young man's boss has already been neutralized?"

Taking a seat, Mr. Creedy replied in an offended tone, "What do you take me for, an amateur?"

Next to speak was Troy Rothsman, head of God's Bank. "Should we go ahead and eliminate the young man as well? I don't want any screw ups, Galvin."

Galvin pondered this for a moment and with a thoughtful finger pointing in the air replied in a relaxed tone, "No, not yet anyway. He may be of more use in the future." Having a chuckle at this, the youngest of the group, though not by much, was the brash Lord Barack Bush, head of Royal Corporation. "In the meantime, you keep dangling carrots in front of him."

Rolling his eyes and with impatience in his deep voice, David Rothsman, head of Bank of His Majesty, commanded, "Put it on screen, and let's see what we've got." Galvin followed his orders and entered the code again to access the video stream. He then entered a command in his hand held device and a clear picture came on a big flat screen monitor at the back of the room. On the video was a first person view of a small group drinking coffee and chatting, but with no sound to be heard.

Mason Black, head of World Corp. and the leader of the cabal, grinned contentedly at the screen and proclaimed, "They're definitely on the other side. The seed has been planted."

Barack Bush gave a curious look to the apex of the pyramid, Mr. Black, and asked, "How can you tell it's the other side?"

Mr. Black answered condescendingly, "Number one, do slaves on this side of the world have houses that nice? Number two, do slaves over here drink coffee like that? No, and no."

David Rothsman found the lack of sound to be curious and asked, "May I ask why there is no sound?"

Mr. Black looked at his subordinate coldly and replied, "For security reasons." They had done it. "Congratulations, gentlemen," the sharp dressed Mr. Black continued, "The first successful spy has been sent to the other side of the world. Finally, we have our opportunity. This changes everything. Soon we will have the technology to move in on the other side of the world. The future begins now," he concluded with fire in his eyes. He turned his attention towards Mr. Creedy. "Creedy, do you have everything in place for the reverse engineering. When we have useful intel, I don't want any time wasted."

Galvin Creedy gave an assuring nod to Mr. Black and said, "I'll get started on it with Mr. Gray right away."

He turned once again, this time towards one of the Rockateller men. "Darius," he called to attention, "What does our good man Mr. Gray say about the state of the current war? Have our goals been reached? What do the numbers say?"

The no-nonsense Darius Rockateller responded, “I’m pleased to say that sufficient casualties have been reached and we’re on target for a cease-fire in one year. Who shall concede the loss? What shall we do for reparations and concessions?”

Each man looked around the room at the other for a moment before John Rockateller suggested, “I say we pull President Tyran’s funding. He’s been a little too uppity lately, if you ask me. We’ll force him to concede some territory to King Sitan along with some economic reparations.”

Lord Barack Bush had a good laugh at this and chimed in, “Agreed. We need to teach that little prick a lesson and bring him to heel.”

Mr. Black thoughtfully nodded his head in approval and ordered, “Agreed. You guys make all the necessary financial arrangements and let Mr. Gray start on the peace negotiations. We’ll need Mr. Bernays to prepare the necessary propaganda and usual amusements as he sees fit. More importantly, Mr. Gray and Zee Hissinger need to get the reverse engineering and technological development project going. I don’t want any time wasted.” After a pause Mr. Black smirked and said, “One more thing. You Rockateller boys do something about energy consumption. It’s been way too high. Get those food prices up, too. Until we have more resources from the other side, we need to be more cutthroat with the slaves.” Both Rockatellers alertly gave a nod of agreement.

## Chapter 4

The young intelligence operative 0020 was speeding along in his nondescript black SUV down a misty back road in the heavily wooded hills. He was extremely upset at how his meeting with Galvin Creedy had ended. No money? Not yet? What was the hold up? Something didn't sit well in his stomach. The young spy was normally cool and collected, but this was eating at his nerves. "I've gotta talk to agent 0011. He's the only other person that worked on this project, at least that I know of. He's logistics, and I'm ops," he pondered to himself.

Continuing to grow more apprehensive, "Why would I be sent to deliver the package? 0011 is technically my superior. Somethin ain't right, I know it." Growing defiant, the mercenary thought to himself, "I'll get my money, one way or another. Just talk to 0011. Those bastards are gonna gimme my money!"

After an hour of reckless driving and his mind running itself ragged in circles, the young soldier of fortune was back in the city. He parked the SUV about a block away from his destination, just as protocol demanded. 0020 was a good order follower. He was ignorant and ambitious, which made him extremely easy to manipulate. Now, on top of those undesirable qualities, he was angry.

The young man approached a bright little corner shop which had a neon sign that read "Candyland". The little shop stuck out like a sore thumb in a mostly residential neighborhood of old style duplexes and rusty iron gates. He rang the doorbell as it was after hours and a voice came over the intercom, "Candyland, state your business," came a terribly nasal female voice.

"Special delivery, 20 kilos of sugar," came the hurried response. He waited for a moment for the door to open and impatiently thought, "Damn automated security systems." The door popped open accompanied by a loud buzzing sound.

He walked briskly through the shop, past candies of all colors, shapes, and sizes. Enough candy inside to keep vast multitudes of dentists in a comfortable amount of work for years. He hurried to the back of the tacky little shop and went down a staircase to the basement. Once in the dingy basement, he approached a clock on the wall, which promptly scanned his tongue. After his identity was verified, the worn brick wall parted ways and a secret room appeared. After entering, the wall closed itself immediately.

The room was fairly dark except for a desk lamp on one of the broad oak desks which were randomly scattered about. One of the desks was littered with piles of paper of various sizes and colors, some flat as a pancake, others wadded up in disgust.

A man's face was planted in the oak desk amidst the sea of papers. Disgusted with what he saw, 0020 yelled, "Wake up lazy ass! We've got problems!"

The slouching man in the office chair with his face planted remained that way. This caused an eerie sensation to creep up the spine of the young spy. Rushing over to the motionless creature, 0020 grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him, slowly at first, then growing more violent as the obvious truth emerged. It dawned on 0020 that the icy hand of death was in the room. He broke out in a cold sweat.

There was no blood, no evidence of struggle. There were no weapons. Could it be a coincidence? No, don't be that gullible, he thought. Taking a deep breath, the apprehensive agent tried to reason. Who would do this? And why? Am I next? Should I

do anything with the body? Where should I go? Higher, that's where I need to go. This is big. I was with Galvin Creedy just hours ago. Something's way wrong. I need to safeguard myself. For now, though, I need to run.

## Chapter 5

A casual strolling caravan of about twenty men made its way methodically through the halls of divine power. High arching ceilings, priceless works of art, and a gleaming white floor to go with the impressive tapestry were all a familiar site for High Priest Hellius, Spiritual and Secular Leader of the Divine Nation. He strode confidently at the head of this pack of so-called dignitaries. A towering figure dressed in gleaming white robes and ornamented in fine jewels, the High Priest was en route to a most important meeting.

Upon reaching the Sacred Oval Office, the High Priest turned to his inferiors and they bowed reverently. Waving his hand in an effeminate manner, Hellius motioned for his entourage to take their leave, for the meeting was a most private matter. Only two guards remained outside the immaculate wooden doorway after Hellius made his entrance.

Upon entering, Hellius was greeted at once by a gruff looking character dressed in a sharp black suit. He was seated in the High Priest's jeweled throne in a casual manner.

"What took you so long?" asked the stern character. Just as the High Priest was about to answer, he was cut off. "Spare me the details," continued Darius Rockateller, "I don't really care." He didn't mention the fact that Mr. Rockateller was in his throne, due to the fact that the High Priest felt it best to swallow his pride in the presence of his master. Hellius only smiled as he took a much lesser leather seat next to his superior.

"How gracious of you to visit, Darius." Rockateller rolled his eyes and unenthusiastically talked back.

"Spare me your groveling, Hellius. I'm here on business, as always. I have no interest in your company." Hellius said nothing but just stared at the owner of Point of Light Energy as if he were a dog awaiting a bone.

"We're putting energy prices up immediately," ordered Darius. "Also, food is going up, too."

"May I ask why?" inquired the High Priest.

"No, you may not," answered the energy tycoon.

"If I may, sir. The people have been a bit restless lately, and I fear that if prices rise again, I may not be able to quell the uprisings."

Rockateller angrily protested, "What the hell are your Benevolent Police for, Hellius? Use them! Keep your damn people in line. More beheadings, I don't give a shit! I'll throw you a bone, though. I'll have the right people get the proper propaganda on God Vision to help you out. You have to do your part, though."

The man in the sparkling white robes was speechless for a moment. Rockateller continued, "Have more festivals, more games, whatever it takes to keep them in line. And one more thing, you need to get ready for another war. The Royals are burning out and we need a new conflict, so get the troops in order. We're counting on you."

Hellius looked his boss in the eye and asked, "Can I count on the usual?"

"You mean your bribe," Darius said directly.

"Call it what you wish," replied Hellius.

"Yes, the usual two percent increase from the energy revenue," answered Rockateller.

## Chapter 6

The next morning again had a clear, sparkling blue sky. The stranger was just beginning to feel comfortable in his new surroundings and now he was venturing out to see more of this strange world. He still didn't know how exactly he would pay his way. And what about travel permits! Where he came from he needed special papers to travel. In order to get these special papers, one had to pay money, fill out numerous forms, and make appointments! These things take time! How could one just head for the hills on a whim? It was quite an outrageous idea, he thought. Despite his doubts, he was overall feeling excited at the prospect of learning their way of life. He thought for sure his experiences on this side of the wall would give him a great deal of writing material upon his return.

This was all running through his mind as he made his way through the house. Quite an impressive house, it was, too. It had charming works of art generously scattered throughout. Paintings, carvings, drawings, and all types of synthetic materials which he was unfamiliar with. The walls of the place were brightly colored, full of life. The floor was a sleek hardwood. The ceilings were vaulted and stone archways led the way to separate rooms. What a marvelous place to live! No one that he knew back home had even close to this much space. Everyone he knew was in the city.

The stranger was drawn towards the kitchen by the allure of fresh brewed coffee. As he came near, he could hear the chatter of Ray and Sophia. Upon entering, he was greeted by Ray with great enthusiasm.

"Good morning! Ready for the big day?"

"I don't feel ready," the stranger replied.

"Why is that?" questioned Sophia.

"I know why," Ray spoke with a hearty grin, "He hasn't had any coffee yet." The stranger was handed a cup of steaming wake up juice by Sophia.

"Well, I suppose one of the most obvious reasons I don't feel ready is that I don't have any travel papers," he informed them with a sigh.

Ray and Sophia gave each other a confused look. "Travel papers? What are those?" Ray asked, genuinely uncertain and curious.

"Where I come from," the stranger began, "It is necessary to obtain a travel permit from the government when you go more than one hundred miles from your home." This was extremely peculiar to Ray and Sophia. They knew nothing of travel papers or licenses of any sort. The very idea of external government was completely foreign to them! Permission to travel, how insane!

"You're joking, right?" Ray asked in a semi-serious tone. He really thought it might be a joke due to its utter absurdity.

Equally bewildered, the stranger asked, "You mean that I don't need a travel permit here?" All Sophia and Ray could do was laugh.

"With your natural ability for humor, maybe you should join Jovius on stage," Ray suggested. Sophia pointed out the front window and exclaimed, "Speak of the devil, here he is!"

Jovius was making his way from a large black vehicle. It was sleek, with clearly defined angles and very stylish for a transport vehicle. It was loaded down with all sorts of merchandise safely stored in its high arching rear. Jovius approached the door. He was wearing another plethora of color which made him look like a walking montage. Sophia opened the front door and serenaded him with the usual tongue-in-cheek salutation. "That's a no parking zone, but if you make the right offer, maybe I can let you slide!"

Jovius laughed and, never at a loss for retorts, playfully responded, "Actually, you must be seeing things. There's nothing parked there. Maybe you've been drinking on the job again? I'd like to see your manager, please!"

As he stepped through the doorway he instantly was hit by the intoxicating aroma of coffee. "I'll need a cup of that before we hit the road."

Sophia smiled and said, "Come on in, the road crew is ready to go."

They entered the kitchen and Jovius instantly questioned the newcomer. "You ready to pull that donkey cart, Vintage?"

The stranger was becoming accustomed to the absurdities of Mr. Jovius and his reply showed as much. "I'd love to, but I'm afraid I don't have a work permit in your country."

Jovius grinned and said, "Oh, well, don't worry. We can make that happen!"

"So Jovius," Ray began, "What are you charging the new guy for your tour guide services?"

Jovius looked up as if thinking really hard and replied, "Well, I guess a couple years of hard labor will do."

"You guys are unspeakably dreadful," Sophia stated with a condemning look. She continued, "Anyway, where's our first stop?"

"Fire Lake. They're having a festival down there. After that, I've got some stops up north."

"It's cold up north this time of year. What are we gonna do for Vintage?" Ray inquired.

"I'm way ahead of you. I've got a temp suit in the transport for him," Jovius assured them.

"What's a temp suit?" asked Vintage. Ray explained, "It's a transparent full body nano-tech body suit. It adapts to weather conditions and keeps your body temperature stable."

Vintage thought this to be quite fantastic as it was well beyond what was in his world. Thirsting for more, he asked, "What's nano-tech?"

This gave Jovius a look of disbelief. He rolled his eyes and impatiently coaxed, "Hold on, we don't have all day for a science seminar. Talk about it on the road. Let's go."

After they all were out the front door, Ray gave a command. "Computer, raise force field to minimum." Vintage got a confused look and asked what a force field was. Ray told him to put his hand about a foot from the front door. Upon doing so, his hand

hit what felt like a warm flow of current. He was not given an electric jolt, but found that he could not move his hand any further no matter how hard he pushed.

"How fantastically bizarre!" Vintage exclaimed with the wonderment of a child on his face.

"Come on, let's go! Science show is over!" Jovius yelled sarcastically as he put an end to the joy of Vintage.

As they headed to the vehicle, Vintage was taken aback by the enormity of it. He was curious as to what the cargo was. "May I ask about the cargo? What are you delivering, exactly?"

Jovius couldn't help but smirk when he answered, "Just the usual. Various forms of natural as well as synthetic contraband." Vintage's eyes darted from side to side, uncertain if the answer bore any truth.

"Go ahead and sit in front," Ray offered. "I'll sit with Sophia in back," as they came upon the shiny black transport. As they took their seats, Ray continued to nonchalantly play along with the cargo story. "Just the usual, so maybe some severed goats heads, human organs, and a various assortment of endangered species. Did you tranquilize the animals this time so they don't make so much noise?" Ray and Jovius couldn't help but let the laughs flow out.

Sophia shook her head and said, "When he goes back to his side of the world, he might just write a scathing review about you two in the newspaper."

The impressive machine rolled away from the house and picked up speed down the country road. Jovius decided to actually give a straight answer. "I have all sorts of deliveries to make. A smorgasbord, you might say."

"I think he was hoping for a little more specific answer," Sophia suggested.

"Anything from 3D printers, to antique clocks, to personal desalination devices, to holophones. You name it, I've got it." Vintage admitted that he didn't know what half of those things were.

"Have you guys discovered fire over there yet?" Ray quipped.

Sophia offered to turn on some music and asked what type of music their guest preferred. "I don't really like music," came the shocking reply.

"I might have to kick you out of my ride," Jovius threatened with a poker face. Vintage was impressed with what he was seeing so far on the other side of the planet. With everything new he learned, his curiosity grew ever greater. He was developing a thirst for knowledge. He was curious as to how such a vast array of goods could be created and traded without money issued by government institutions.

"There's only one thing I'm not clear on," Vintage said.

"Really? Only one?" Ray joked.

Vintage asked, "If you don't have a government, then do banks issue your money?" Everyone said they didn't know what a bank was. This completely astonished Vintage. How could capital be raised and trade conducted without banks to supply money, he thought to himself. "A bank is a business that creates money and credit. Sometimes the government does it, but sometimes it's a private business," Vintage explained.

Everyone couldn't help but laugh at this. Puzzled, Vintage inquired as to what was so humorous about banks. "It's a miracle you guys aren't extinct," Jovius half jested.

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Jovius this time. Sorry, Vintage. Look on the bright side, though. You're lucky to be alive!" Sophia remarked as she tried to control her giggles.

"Most people issue their own credit," Ray began explaining, "Based on what they produce."

Vintage chuckled in disbelief. How inefficient! Millions or maybe billions of people creating their own money and credit? How could such a chaotic clusterfuck possibly work? Vintage asked how such a seemingly complex and tedious system could ever be possible.

Ray took it upon himself to get into the details. "The majority of people use some type of electronic credit network. Computers help facilitate production and trade based on what people offer and what people want."

It was still unfathomable to Vintage, but he pressed on out of curiosity. "Are the networks international?" he probed further.

"Inter what?" Jovius boomed.

Vintage explained that he wanted to know if the credit networks were accepted anywhere in the world.

"Occasionally you might come across a vendor that doesn't accept a certain type of credit, but it's rare. Of course, anyone has the freedom to accept or deny any type of credit at any time. All trade is voluntary," Ray elucidated.

Vintage then asked what would happen if a person decided not to be in an electronic network. "Most people that aren't in networks trade locally amongst themselves without the aid of technology. There are quite a few people who prefer this simple way of life. There are also small credit networks in which people print their own paper credit. The concept is the same, it's just not electronic. And then there are those who are completely self-sufficient and don't want to trade anything," Ray clarified.

Vintage asked if it were only individuals who created credit.

"I forgot to mention," Ray answered, "That a lot of families work together to form their own credit, that way they have more diversity to offer on the market. Some small towns and cities do the same, but they're less common."

The newcomer was still quite skeptical as to the practicality of such a way to conduct trade. At the very least, human nature was to be greedy and untrustworthy. How would commitments be enforced? No, surely this was all an absurd fantasy.

"What if someone does not honor their commitments? How can the credits retain value if there is no enforcement?" Vintage asked skeptically.

Sophia questioned, "Does your money always retain its value?" Vintage shrugged and replied, "Well, no, not always. Sometimes there are large fluctuations and money loses much of its value."

"Despite all of the so-called control and enforcement," Jovius added as he rolled his eyes.

"Not honoring your commitments is a fast way to be poor and destitute, so it almost never happens. No one will do business with you if all you do is lie and scam.

Yeah, you might be able to travel around and get away with it for a short while, but eventually everyone will know not to trust you and you won't be able to trade with anyone." Ray calmly explained.

This was all a bit confusing to the new arrival. His knowledge of economics as well as a host of other things was limited and quite non-existent in some cases. Where he came from, everything was very compartmentalized. If you were a scientist, you knew little of economics. If you were a military officer, you knew nothing about teaching. Everyone had a specialized function. He was curious as to why his companions knew so much of how their economic system worked. He asked, "How do you know so much about your trade systems?"

Ray was the first to respond. He stated that he was a software developer and helped create one of the local currencies. However, in general, people learned the basics of trade. He also explained that the best part, in his opinion, was that everything was voluntary. People were always free to create new ways to trade. Sometimes they were successful, other times they failed, but the possibility was always open for thought, debate, and trial and error. Sophia added that usually people had multiple skills, ideas, and creative capacities. In short, most people had a vast plethora of knowledge.

Suddenly, on the horizon, there was a strange vision slowly growing in scope. It was nestled amongst the lush greenery of the low mountains. As the vehicle raced on, the spectacle became more defined. The object was glaring with great radiance like a star. It soon became clear it was a well-defined geometric shape of some sort. It looked as if it were an enormous diamond. "What the hell is that?" asked Ray.

Jovius, who traveled frequently, was puzzled as well. "You got me, I have no idea. Wanna take a closer look?" Jovius offered with a twinge of curiosity in his voice.

The stranger was more curious than anyone but the object was quite far off. With this in mind, he brought it to their attention that the road didn't go towards the object and they would have to walk.

"Why walk when we can fly?" Jovius asked in a half mocking voice as he pressed a few buttons on the control console of the vehicle. The sleek black cargo carrier then began to transform itself. The wheels tucked themselves away and a blue glowing circle of synthetic material ringed itself around the bottom perimeter of the vehicle. All within seconds, they were hovering a few feet above ground and flying smoothly towards the mystery. The sudden change gave a slight jolt to the stomach and Vintage showed discomfort on his thin face. Sophia asked if he had ever flown before.

"Never had the chance," came the queasy reply.

A couple minutes later and they were looking at the marvel up close. It was three enormous transparent pyramids joined together. One in the middle was turned on its apex and was supported by the other two adjoined to it, the other two sitting on their base. The spectacle stretched for what the visitors thought to be roughly five hundred yards in length and appeared to tower more than a hundred yards in the air. Inside each clear wonder was an abundant and motley mix of plants. They all stood with their heads tilted back, with eyes fixated above, taking it all in.

"Perhaps someone is doing a grand science experiment," suggested Vintage.

Before anyone could respond, the four were caught off guard by a strange voice.

"Quite the sight, isn't it?" came the voice. Startled, all four turned around. They saw a middle aged man, perhaps fifty-something. He was tall and lanky with a square jaw and thinning gray hair.

"Yeah, we were just admiring it all," Ray said. "Is this your work?"

"This is my family's work," came the answer in a friendly tone and a warm smile.

"May I ask you a silly question?" Sophia asked. The man said that he would be happy to take a silly question from such a lovely young gal. She asked what it was.

"It's a new type of greenhouse," he proudly explained. "It was my grandson's idea."

Vintage thought this was curious as he knew the man wasn't old enough to have a grandson of any significant years. He asked how old the grandson was. The man looked Vintage in the eye and said, "He's ten."

"Ten!" exclaimed Vintage. "He must be a genius! How can someone so young have such marvelous ideas!"

Everyone began laughing at the innocence of Mr. Vintage. Everyone except their host. Taking notice of this, Jovius apologized and requested the forgiveness of their host, for Vintage was new to their world. He was not aware of how young people could create wonders with the mind if they were left free. The scope of individual genius could bloom if children were not forced into twelve years of authoritarian indoctrination centers.

Ray decided to turn the attention back to the grand creation of the man's family. "So can you tell us about this construction?"

The man happily went on to explain some details of the giant greenhouse. Plants which required more sunlight were placed towards the top of the structures. It was then a downward progression towards the bottom. Plants at ground level needed almost no light. It also had a self-contained irrigation system. He also told them of something which was not visible to the eye. He informed them that the glass was embedded with nano-bots which could amplify the sunlight when necessary to negate cloudiness and make the system more efficient. "The whole point," he made plain, "is to see which crops thrive in such an environment and which ones will be less than stellar. We're hoping for at least a twenty percent increase in crop yield."

The technology used to amplify the power of the sun caught Ray's attention. "Is that the same technology used on the moon settlement?" The farmer quickly affirmed that it was similar technology and that he knew some people involved in its development.

Vintage, however, was still pondering the words 'moon settlement'. Moon settlement? This was an impossibility in his mind. He came from a world where flying machines didn't exist. This added to his confusion as to how people left uncontrolled by authorities could be so productive. Why was everyone taught in his world that chaos reigned in the other?

"Earth to Vintage, hello!" came the voice. Vintage snapped out of his thought process to see Jovius waving at him to get his attention. "Hey, we're going up to our new friend's storage house. He makes wine and is selling some bottles to us and some people on my route. You coming, or do you want to just stay here and keep staring into space?"

Vintage said he preferred to wait.

“A lot on your mind?” Sophia asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Maybe I should just be alone for a bit,” Vintage explained with an uneasy look about him.

His companions walked away and the mind of Vintage again started to wander and wonder. It’s not an easy thing to have your entire reality challenged. Everything you once knew is thrown into doubt, everything must be examined. It was painful, but a type of pain that causes an infinite amount of greatness at some point in the future. The world that he thought he understood a great deal was crashing down on him. He now realized that he knew very little. Taking a deep breath, he said aloud to himself, “Why am I here?” He then laid down in the soft green grass, closed his eyes, and began to drift away.

## Chapter 7

A rickety train chugged past computer programmer number 0777 as she walked home from work on a bitterly cold evening. Her tired face let out a deep sigh as she held onto her cap so it wouldn't be swept away by the devilish wind. It was a long walk, nearly an hour, but computer programmer number 0777 couldn't afford the train anymore. Energy to heat her house was just too high and taxes were due next month. Under normal circumstances, if her husband were around, she wouldn't have to fret so much about paying bills. She wondered how long until he would be back. She missed him too much, as did their son. She kept telling herself, though, that her husband had done the right thing. He had been given an offer he couldn't refuse. The problem was that she didn't know anything about his mission. She didn't know where he'd gone, what he'd be doing, or how long he'd be away. They don't call them top secret missions for nothing. She knew he'd be back one day, though. She just had to be patient, strong, and resilient. She was a proud woman, though, and considered herself lucky.

Today was visitation day from her eight year old son. He was doing his studies at the Department of Caretakers, like all children were required to do, and was coming to spend the evening with her. Her child was doing well. So smart, top of his class. She was also thankful for living in such a free country. Tyran Max was a brave and intelligent leader. Yes, 0777 was truly a lucky woman.

She arrived at Residential Tower 113B and was greeted by the plump door man number 1100. The door man gave her a jolly fat smile and greeted 0777. "Awful cold, isn't it?"

0777 grimaced and agreed, "Indeed, 1100, indeed it is," as she walked towards the elevator.

With a pleasant and energetic smile 1100 asked, "Did you hear? They're having a bonus arrow lottery this weekend. You think you'll try your luck?"

0777 decided to lie and replied, "Maybe. I'll give it some thought," as she was silently praying impatiently for the elevator to arrive. Why would she want to risk her life to win some cash? Sure, there was some sick pleasure to be derived from the whole spectacle. Thousands of arrows shot straight into the air over a crowd of thousands of people. Whoever came out unscathed, without moving, was awarded a large bag of crisp bills. Too risky, though. If she didn't have her children, then maybe she'd risk her life for some dough, but not now. After a few seconds of eternity, the elevator made its happy noise of arrival and, relieved, 0777 stepped in.

She got off on the third floor and walked through the dim hallway to her apartment door. Once inside, she couldn't help but lament at how dingy, dark, and inhuman it seemed. "Damn place is falling apart. At the very least, it needs a decent paint job," she thought as she glanced around the room with contempt.

She wanted to get everything in order before her son arrived, but was too tired from her long day of toil. She decided to just plop down on the sofa, let down her long chestnut colored hair, and turn on the television to relax for a bit. She flipped through all the channels offered by the Freedom Television Network. Just the same old stuff. News bulletins flashed by, energy sources dwindling, prices set to go up again, the war

drags on, food prices on the rise. Buy this, take that pill, feel this way about that, laugh at this, don't laugh at that, cry here. What was the point of it all?

Her melancholy meanderings were joyfully cut short by the arrival of her cherished son, Student 2001. He startled her a bit as he came bursting happily through the door. "Mama, I'm home!" he shouted with elation as he ran towards her. She bounced off the sofa to meet him and give him a warm embrace.

"Oh, my love, you're home early!"

"Yeah, is that ok?" he asked innocently.

"It's better than ok, it's absolutely wonderful!" she shouted with joy. "I'm sorry the place is such a mess. I just got home a bit ago." Of course, the place literally could have been a sky-high mountain of garbage and he wouldn't have cared. He was just happy to see his mom. Missing his father somehow made him appreciate his mother more.

"Mom, when is dad coming home?" he asked with wide eyes as he sprung himself onto the faded sofa.

She sat down beside him and tried to hold back the tears. This was one of those situations where lying might be valiant. No, not now. Just be honest, she thought. "He'll be home as soon as he can," she said as she attempted to give a reassuring smile.

Trying desperately to change the subject, she asked how everything was at school. "Good," came the vague reply. Then, "I have a question. In class the instructor said that the black wall is there to protect us. Is that true?"

"Yes, of course it is."

"How do you know it's true?" the boy persisted.

After a brief pause, she explained, "Well, because I was taught that in school when I was your age. Everyone knows the wall protects us."

"Protects us from what?" he begged for more information.

"From chaos and the violence and death it brings. Without the wall protecting us from the chaos of the other side, there wouldn't be any peace. Do you understand?"

The boy put a small finger to his mouth in an inquisitive manner. "Are we at war with the Royal Region right now?" She grimaced. This was not the happy visit with her son she was hoping for. After all, she only got one visit per month, so she wanted to make it count. She sighed.

"Yes, we are fighting a war against the Royal Region, unfortunately."

The boy now looked confused. "War is chaos and death, isn't it?"

Her face was now a bit flushed. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"Then the wall isn't doing a very good job," he said matter-of-factly.

She looked at him with a raised brow, "No, I suppose it's not." "Where," she continued, "do you get all these questions, anyway?"

Absolutely uncertain as to where questions came from, he responded, "From inside." "But," he added, "I can't ask questions at school, so I save them all for you."

She smiled at his innocence, "Well, that's great my dear. I'm happy to answer them for you."

## Chapter 8

The early afternoon sun was now beating down heavily as the shiny beast continued to speed towards its first destination. Taking notice of the high velocity they were now traveling, Vintage became a bit uneasy.

"Quite a brisk pace we're at," he remarked in a subtle tone.

"It's a great feeling, isn't it?" Jovius said with a proud smile.

Vintage took a gulp of air and then commented with a deadpan face, "I just wasn't sure if there might be police around. I wouldn't want any trouble, you know."

There was a fleeting moment of palpable shock shared by the other three before the uproarious laughter ensued. From the back seat, Ray reached up to Vintage's shotgun position and grabbed his shoulder. Calming himself, Ray again reminded their guest, "The state does not exist here."

Vintage took a moment to process the information. If the state didn't exist, did it mean that there were no police? He thought this to be extremely preposterous. "You mean to tell me there are no police! How in the world do you keep law and order!" he yelled.

The others were just as startled at the thought of a state run police agency. Giving a group of people a monopoly of violence? How absurd!

Jovius, with a broad grin painted on his face and scratching his shiny black head, finally calmed his chuckles and suggested, "Ok, let's analyze this, just for a moment. Will you agree to a brief moral and logical analysis of what you call 'the police'?" Vintage happily agreed. Above all else, certainly police were necessary, right?

Just as Jovius was about to begin, Sophia politely requested, "Jovius, if I may." Jovius reluctantly agreed, saying that she got to have all the fun. Sophia began, "Ok, before I start, please tell me dear Vintage, how the police work where you come from." The stranger thought this a bit odd, but began nonetheless. He explained how in his world, the police were there to serve and protect the people, and to uphold the law. He spoke of them with a tone of reverence in his voice. He explained that laws, such as speed limits, were required to protect the people and that the police were there to make sure the people obeyed such laws for their safety. He also explained how police sometimes had to arrest people who broke the law. This also helped keep society safe.

Everyone politely listened to their new friend state his case, despite their near uncontrollable urge to giggle at such fallacies.

Sophia asked if he was finished. He said that he felt he gave a good summary of the police.

"Ok," Sophia began, "I have a question for you. 'The police' is a group of people, is that correct? Some might even say individuals."

"Yes, that's correct."

"And are you, Vintage, also an individual?"

"Yes, of course, that much is certain."

"Do all individuals have equal rights under Natural Law?"

"What is Natural Law?" Vintage questioned.

"That's a long discussion, we'll save that for later. We're getting close to our first stop," Jovius interjected.

Ray couldn't help himself from asking, "How many years in public schools and you don't know what Natural Law is?" Sophia glared at Ray. "Sorry, I'm just sayin. Please go on," Ray relented.

Sophia continued. "So you do agree that all individuals have equal rights?"

"Yes, I do believe that."

"You said that where you come from, coffee is illegal?"

"That's right."

"After your experience with us, do you think it is wrong to drink coffee?"

"I suppose not."

"And what happens to individuals if they break the law and drink coffee?"

"They are put in prison, of course."

"To be more precise, an individual who drinks coffee is forced to live in a cage."

"You might describe it like that, I guess."

"Do you know where coffee comes from?"

"It's a plant, everyone knows that."

"And if an individual growing this plant is caught by the police, what happens to this individual?"

"He also goes to prison, usually for a much longer time."

"So would it be fair to say that one of the functions of your police is to put people in cages for growing and consuming plants?"

"Well, I never thought of it that way, but I guess that's about right."

"And does this threat of being forced to live in a cage stop people from consuming coffee?"

"It does some, but not everyone."

"And the people who are forced to live in the cages, what becomes of them when released from the cage?"

"Normally, they have difficulty adjusting and living again outside the cage."

"So would you say that the so called law and order enforced by police, in this case, does more damage to individuals than the plant in question?"

"Yes, I believe that's clear. I believe you've made your point."

"Another question that comes to mind. If you, an individual who is not a member of the police, should happen to catch an individual who is a member of the police drinking coffee, are you allowed to force him to live in a cage?"

"What an absurd question! Certainly not!"

"Did you not agree a moment ago that all individuals have equal rights?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then how can one individual, under your system of law, have the right to cage people, and other individuals not?"

"I never thought about it, really. It's just the way it is."

At this point, Jovius couldn't contain himself anymore. "Put in a cage for growing a plant, and you think you're free! Man, that's too much!" as he laughed contentedly.

There was a moment of awkward silence as nobody knew quite where to go from that point, so Jovius decided to point out that they were nearing their first stop.

"I'll give you a fair warning this time. We're about to fly. You want a paper bag or something?" Annoyed, Vintage rolled his eyes and assured everyone that he'd manage just fine.

Jovius again hit a button and the craft magically started transforming itself seamlessly into a sleek flying vessel. If you were to view it from the proper angle and distance, you might mistake it for a flying black whale with a halo under its belly. Ray asked where the first stop was exactly. Jovius happily informed the crew that they would be stopping at Mama Mari's Mountain Cabin.

"She's something else. A real special old lady. You all are in for a treat," Jovius excitedly told his travel companions. "There's just one thing I'm a little concerned about, though," he continued, now wearing a shrewd poker face.

"Let me guess. She has fifty cats and we have to herd them before Mama Mari will feed us," Ray jested.

Jovius smiled as he maneuvered the craft through the jagged mountains and made a tight turn. "She might not have room for the new guy. Vintage, you ok sleeping with goats?"

A look of horror crossed the rookie's face and Sophia instantly came to the rescue. "Nobody's sleeping with goats!" she cried as her eyes shot beams through Jovius' seat.

They could now see the cabin coming up on the horizon. It was nestled amongst a sea of green on the slope of a low mountain. An amorous assortment of sparkling flowers of all sorts dotted the luscious landscape as well.

"How are you gonna land this thing?" Ray questioned with doubt on his voice, "Not that I don't trust your piloting skills."

"The last time I was here, I landed with my eyes closed," Jovius claimed with a mischievous grin. As they approached, a landing strip came into clear view and Jovius eased the flying beast slowly down to safety. It was time to meet Mama Mari.

## Chapter 9

Mama Mari stood all of a whopping five feet tall and still had the frame of a little ballerina, albeit one with eighty something years. She looked sweet and innocent, wearing huge spectacles over her bright, soft blue eyes. Looks can be deceiving, however, as she had a sharp mind and tongue, never one to shy away from a good argument. In contrast, she also possessed a charm and magnetism about her that was quite unique. Everybody loved her. She also had a mind blowing number of abilities and skills which she put to good use over the years, helping to provide for a large family. It was this fantastic human being who came out to greet the travelers as they approached the front door of the cabin.

"You looked a little shaky on the landing there, Jovius. Maybe I'll show you how it's done before you leave tomorrow," Mari mocked her friend with a smile.

"Oh, come on," Jovius defended himself, "That was textbook!" They had a warm embrace and then she commented that he had brought some visitors.

"Yeah, I hope that's ok," Jovius said.

"Yeah, that's fine, as long as they don't mind sleeping with the goats," she suggested with a chuckle. "I'm Mari. Jovius, where are your manners? Introduce us!"

Jovius let out a sigh and introduced his companions, saving the best for last. "I'm honored to bring you, for the first time ever, a man from the other side of the wall!"

Mari laughed a cute little old lady type of laugh and said, "Well, really! This ought to be quite the entertaining evening! I can't wait to hear about the other side!" Vintage gave a formal and courteous smile and said he would be happy to tell all sorts of things about the other side.

"Great," Mari exclaimed, "It should make for an unforgettable tragic comedy!"

Puzzled, Vintage asked what exactly she meant by 'tragic comedy'.

"Don't worry, you'll learn," Mari confidently declared. "Well, come on inside, make yourselves comfortable, and meet the family," Mari invited with a sparkling smile as she motioned towards the front door.

The cabin was quite large and made of marvelous cypress. It was obvious that it had been around for quite a while as it looked a bit worn, which made the charming, rustic appeal all the more prevalent.

As they entered, the inside was even more inviting. Hardwood floors, a strong fire burning in the antique fireplace, lots of handmade furniture, and a fine collection of colorful drawings decorating the wall. Vintage was caught with his mouth gaping open at the fine dwelling.

"What a marvelous place!" Sophia was the first to express. All nodded in agreement.

"Places like this don't exist where I come from," Vintage lamented as he gawked around. Mari put a hand on her hip, raised an eyebrow and asked why not.

"Where I come from, opportunities to study and work are only available in cities, so that's where everyone lives."

Mari sighed and shook her head in disgust. "That's a shame."

Suddenly, a little boy ran towards the group in a flash and stopped on a dime next to Mari, grinning from ear to ear. "Visitors!" he jubilantly yelled.

"That's right, you love visitors, huh?" Mari asked as she patted the boy on the head.

"Yes, Great Mari, yes!" he confirmed. Mari laughed and told everyone that he called her that because she was his great grandmother.

"And I thought it was because of your infinite wisdom," Jovius teased.

Not to be outdone, Mari replied, "No, that's why you call me that!"

Ray exclaimed that Jovius had met his match and that it was for the best.

"His name is Sol," Mari informed the group. Everyone introduced themselves and the boy was quite cordial with them. Mari urged the boy, "Sol, why don't you go and get some snacks for our guests. I know you're awful proud of your work. Run on and get some plates ready and we'll go sit by the fire." Sol happily complied and ran off towards the kitchen.

Everyone followed their quaint host towards an open area where there were a variety of sofas, chairs, footstools, and a sprinkling of other furnishings and decorations, both modern and antique. On the floor was an old bearskin rug which looked as if it could come alive at any moment. A warm glow from the fireplace gave the room the feeling that you had stepped back in time, very far back indeed.

Everyone was taking a seat when their hostess spoke with a bit of urgency, "Just to give you a fair warning," as she held up a wrinkled old hand towards Vintage, "You're about to sit in the experimental chair."

He was literally just an inch or two away from landing in the chair and stopped cold upon hearing the warning. In mid-sit he thought it would be pertinent to ask, "Is it ok if I sit in the experimental chair?"

"Oh yes," she assured, "It's just that my grandson just brought it today, and we're not sure if it's gonna work too well or not, but go ahead, you're welcome to it. You can be our guinea pig, isn't that exciting?"

A bit flustered, but not to be frightened by an inanimate object, Vintage smiled and finished sitting down into the large green chair.

Ray smirked and asked the obvious question of what the experiment was. Mari proudly announced that the chair was a prototype for medical purposes. She claimed that it had sensor technology that could adjust the chair to fit everyone's specific spine and posture. Also, if it sensed that your spine was out of alignment since your last sitting, it would make the proper adjustments for you. "The best part is, it has a pop up machine gun with silencer," she said with a straight face while looking Vintage in the eye. "It has voice commands if you'd like to give it a try."

Turning a strange shade of gray, Vintage volunteered, "Maybe I'll just sit on the floor. The bearskin looks quite comfortable, actually." The old lady burst out laughing.

"I'm just joking about the machine gun, but go ahead and give the spinal adjustment a shot." Sweating a bit and grimacing, Vintage politely declined.

"So there stranger, why do they call you Vintage? You don't look that old to me," she engaged her rare guest from another world. Snickering a bit, Ray gave the answer.

"Jovius generously bestowed that elegant name on our friend here."

Intrigued, the old lady confronted Jovius very directly. "Dare I ask two questions? Number one, why was it necessary to give him a name? Did he lose it on the trip over? Number two, why a silly name like Vintage? Jovius, sometimes I can't believe people

actually pay you to talk.” Everyone had a good chuckle on Jovius’ dime, including Jovius himself. The old lady didn’t pull any punches, that’s for sure.

“Actually, the reasoning was quite logical,” Jovius said in a playfully defensive manner.

“Enlighten me,” the old woman insisted.

“He had a number. Over there, over the wall, that’s how they are. Everyone has numbers, not names,” Jovius explained.

A look of disgust came over the sweet lady’s wrinkled face. “How absolutely deplorable! Calling people numbers, as if they’re part of some lifeless equation.”

Jovius saw that Vintage was a bit taken aback by this comment and tried to offer a smidge of consolation. “Don’t take it personally, she does it to everyone.”

“So why the name Vintage?” she persisted.

Sophia rolled her eyes and answered, “Because his number is 2001, and Jovius thought since that was a great year for wine, that the name made sense, for some reason.”

Mari thought this to be extremely comical and wondered aloud how Jovius knew that 2001 was such a great year for wine. That was centuries ago! Jovius proudly said that he’d read it in a book, a very knowledgeable book actually, specifically about the history of wine.

Sol came back into the room, this time with his hands full. He was proudly carrying two small platters of meat, cheese, and crackers. He set one platter on one end of the long synthetic coffee table and the other platter on the opposite end. The boy smiled and commanded, “Split table, one left and one right.” The table split in two. It then rolled closer to where the guests were seated to give them an easier reach at each platter. “Go ahead and dig in!” the boy excitedly encouraged the crowd. They obliged and in an impatiently curious manner Sol asked what they thought of the food. Everyone gave high compliments. Sol then proudly announced that he had made the sausage and cheese himself.

“Under his Uncle’s tutelage, mind you,” Mari observed.

Vintage thought to himself how odd it was that a child could learn such a skill so young. It was forbidden for children to do manual labor where he came from, except in times of emergency. How could a child learn anything if he was laboring all day?

“It’s quite delicious, I’m very impressed, Sol,” Sophia complimented the young artisan. “How old are you?”

Sol answered with a respectful smile, “I’m nine, but I’ll be ten next month.”

Before Vintage could remark on the ability of the child at such a tender age, Mari beat him to the punch. “So I’m curious how you made it over that wall.”

“He doesn’t remember,” Jovius mentioned as he gleefully chomped on a mouthful of food.

“I didn’t know you were his official spokesman, Jovius,” the old stalwart said in a blistering tone.

“Mari, I have a question for you,” Ray interjected. “Do you know how old the wall is or who built it?”

Mari gave an ironic laugh and answered, “Good lord, sunshine, just how old do you think I am?” Shaking his head and grinning, Ray said that he didn’t mean it in that way. He was just curious if she had any information about the wall. Nobody he knew

had any information about who built the wall or when it was constructed, or why it was built, for that matter. There were no accurate historical records that he knew of, but that didn't mean that they didn't exist somewhere. All he knew was that it spanned the circumference of the Earth, stretched far into space, and deep under the oceans. This made it impenetrable to those without advanced technology. He thought Mari could shed some light on the subject. It couldn't hurt to ask.

"That's an interesting question to ask our guest here, though," Mari said thoughtfully.

Vintage shrugged his shoulders and said that, as far as he knew, there were no records of the wall's construction on his side of the planet, either. However, in school they learned that the great wall was there for their protection from the chaos of the other side. They just didn't know when or how it was built, but it served this grand purpose of security nonetheless.

"What we do know," a new voice came from behind the group, "Is that it was built sometime after the 21<sup>st</sup> century after the catastrophe." Heads turned as a tall, slim character approached them. Mari introduced the newcomer as her son, Tesla. Tesla directed his attention towards Vintage as he took a seat on the bearskin rug.

"I'm awfully curious about how things work on your side of the world." Vintage asked why that was. Tesla answered with a sly grin, "'Cause as far as we know, it's a miracle any life even exists over there."

Vintage raised an eyebrow and asked, "How do you mean?"

"Before we answer questions like that, perhaps you could answer a few for us, if you'd be so inclined," Tesla propositioned in a genteel manner.

Tesla first asked what region the newcomer was from. He said he was from the western region known as The Democratic Free State.

"In my opinion," he added, "It's the finest region in the world."

Tesla tugged at his gray whiskers and asked for a further explanation of how many regions there were and how they were politically oriented.

"First of all, there are three regions. The one in the Northeast is called The Royal Region. A second located in the Southeast is named the Divine Nation." All were listening attentively and Jovius began to snicker a bit, but was quickly checked by Ray with an elbow to the ribs. Mari broke in and requested Vintage to explain what exactly a democratic free state was. He then went on to tell the crowd that where he came from there were elections every ten years for president and representatives.

"Who is the current president of your region?" asked Sophia.

Before an answer could come, Mari inquired as to what exactly a president was and what functions he served.

Taking a deep breath and his eyes becoming wide, Vintage claimed that there were too many functions to name! However, the most important were to approve laws, to protect the people, and to handle foreign relations.

"So he tells you what to do and what not to do," Jovius stated bluntly.

"I wouldn't put it like that, all laws are for the safety and security of the people."

"Like the one making coffee illegal?" Jovius grinned and fired back.

Mari had a fit at hearing this and exclaimed, "Coffee, illegal!" Before Vintage could get a word out, Mari continued, "I've been drinking coffee over seventy years. Do I look like I'm safe and secure?"

Not sure how to react, Vintage stuttered a bit before Tesla came to his rescue.

"Ok, mom, let the man speak. You can say your piece later." Turning back to their guest, Tesla said apologetically, "Sorry about that, she sure loves her coffee."

Vintage laughed an uncomfortable laugh and responded, "I understand. It is quite a fine drink, actually."

"So what is the president's name?" Sophia asked.

"Tyran Max is president right now."

Ray asked how long a term was. Much to everyone's amazement, the answer was ten years. Ray then asked what purpose the representatives served.

"Their job is to make laws and submit them for approval to the president," Vintage proudly responded.

Jovius couldn't help himself and smarted, "So they tell you what to do, too?" Everyone couldn't help but laugh at this bitter truth.

Deciding to change the angle of the conversation a bit, Jovius questioned, "Please tell us, Vintage, is there any war on your side of the world right now?"

Mari cut a sharp look at Jovius and said, "Damn Jovius, why do you ask questions you already know the answer to?"

Vintage replied that indeed there was a war currently raging between his region and that of the royals.

"And how is this war being paid for, exactly?" Jovius proceeded.

Vintage explained that everyone paid taxes to a special agency in order to finance war as well as many other government functions.

A look of bewilderment came across everyone's face at once. What was a tax, they wondered. Ray took the initiative and asked Vintage to clue them in on what exactly a tax was.

"You don't know what a tax is?" Vintage asked confoundedly with wide eyes. "Well," he continued, "It's money paid to the government so they can serve and protect the people, basically." Ray then asked if the tax was voluntary. "Oh no, taxes are mandatory. Everyone must pay their fair share," Vintage confidently informed the group.

"And who decides when to go to war?" Ray continued.

"The president and representatives do, of course," Vintage answered in a bit of a pompous tone.

Jovius bellowed a huge chuckle and, on the verge of tears, shouted, "So some people calling themselves government, take your money through coercion backed by the threat of violence, and then use that money to send you off to murder and possibly be killed? What absolute madness! And then they teach you that we, on this side of the world, live in chaos! The ludicrous hypocrisy is deafening!"

Hurriedly defending the legitimacy of his way of life, Vintage argued, "Taxes are not taken by violent means. That's not true!"

Mari raised an eyebrow at Jovius and asked him to please calm down. She then turned to the flustered guest and asked, "What happens, my dear boy, if you don't pay taxes?"

After hesitating a bit, he answered, "Well, you go to prison. In extreme cases, you might be terminated." Mari couldn't help but laugh and said, "Well, that sounds like violence to me!"

With a pondering look on his face, Tesla raised a finger and said that he'd be curious to know what Vintage knew about the other regions of the world and their form of government.

"I don't know much about the other regions, as travel there is heavily restricted and information is limited. However, I do know that the Royal Region is ruled with an iron fist by King Sitan. Also, the poor people of the Divine Nation are kept in servitude by the High Priest Hellius."

Tesla went further by asking the reason for the current war.

"We've been trying to liberate the good people of the Royal Region from the folly of King Sitan," came the proud answer.

Tesla then asked if the Divine Nation was currently at peace. Vintage said sadly, "They are not at war externally, but they have many internal troubles."

"Were they ever at war?" Tesla continued.

An emphatic answer came forth. "Oh, yes! Not long ago my good people were invaded by the Divine Nation. It was a horrific war which lasted for years, but democracy and freedom prevailed!"

Intrigued in a grotesque sort of way, Mari intervened. "And what was the purpose of that war?

"They were attempting to subvert our democracy and freedom, and to force their religion upon us."

"So let's see if I have this straight. Your people fight and die in the name of democracy and so-called freedom. The people of the Divine Nation die in the name of their God and religion. I'm going to take a wild guess and say that the people of the Royal Region die for their King and country. Is that right?"

Vintage replied, "Yes, that is their sad battle cry."

Jovius took his turn and joined in. "Yes, very sad. The deepest blue I can imagine. But why is it sad, my friend?"

Vintage laughed a bit and replied with a question, "Isn't it obvious?" Jovius thought this amusing and responded that he knew why it was sad, but wanted to see if Vintage actually knew. With a deadpan face, Vintage cried, "Because they know nothing of freedom!"

Everyone in the room burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter at the great hypocrisy which was just uttered in their presence. Shouts of freedom, freedom, freedom were repeated invariably amidst the raucous cackling.

The adrenaline surged in Jovius and he took the opportunity to let a lesson fly. "What do YOU know of freedom? You are not even your own master. You are forced to choose a master! You do not control what your own labor produces! You fight when you're told to fight and kill who you're told to kill! You're forced to be schooled by your

masters and call it education! You can be put in a cage at any moment for drinking coffee! YOU think YOU are FREE!!! I know farm animals that have more freedom than you!"

At this point everyone was on the verge of tears, except for the guest of honor, of course. He was horrified not just at being laughed at so much. What was really eating away at him was the blunt edge of truth making an incision deep into his psyche.

Suddenly, while Vintage's mind was deep in despair over the words that had been beaten into his skull, an angel appeared on high. At least, that was how she looked to Vintage.

"All that laughter, the great Jovius must have arrived," came the sweet voice of a slender woman at the top of the staircase behind the crowd. "And taking great pains to make our guest uncomfortable, if I hear correctly," she continued as she gleamed a luscious smile and her brown eyes beamed.

"Merciless, with the truth, as always!" shouted Jovius.

The long haired woman with Pocahontas-like features came slowly down the stairs and radiated something towards Vintage as she gave him a playful smile.

"This is one of my granddaughters, Luz," Mari introduced.

She approached the group. "Hey clown," she chided Jovius. She introduced herself to Ray and Sophia, and finally, spoke to the stranger. "So you're from the other side of the world," she said with a look of great interest on her face as she took a seat beside him.

"Yes," he started shyly. "But we've already talked about me and my side of the world so much, if you all don't mind, could I ask a few questions?"

"We never stop anyone from asking questions," Mari assured him.

"You asked me earlier about the wall and its origins, which no one here has any relevant information. However, I'm curious as to what the wall is made out of. With your advanced technology, have you been able to decipher the material? We can't even scratch it with our most powerful weapons, but perhaps you could shed some light on the subject."

"First of all," Jovius began, "I don't want that wall to come down, not until more people from your side of the world are ready for true freedom."

"I might add," Ray interjected, "that we do have technology which can cut the material, but as far as I know, the material is still a mystery."

Sophia spoke up and said, "I agree with Jovius, though. That wall isn't ready to come down."

Confused, Vintage asked what was meant by 'ready for true freedom'.

"Natural Law," Mari stated matter-of-factly. Jovius held up a hand to stop Mari.

"Please Mama Mari, we can't get that deep tonight. I don't want his head to explode from too much information, ya know." Everyone chuckled and nodded in agreement.

Luz looked Vintage in the eye and with a hand on his shoulder said, "Maybe we'll give you lessons one day."

"One day," echoed Jovius, "But not tonight. We've got a long day tomorrow so maybe we'd better get settled in, if that's ok with you Mama Mari."

"You guys are headed up to Fire Lake for the trade festival?" asked Luz.

"We sure are, would you like to come?" offered Jovius.

"I'd love to, but I've got a lot of responsibilities around the house here," Luz answered disappointedly.

Mari smiled and said, "Oh, we'll run things while you're gone. Go ahead and have a good time. I'm sure Jovius will put you to work up there, so you're not getting off that easy."

Jovius then gleefully said, "Well, now we just need to check with the new guy here and see if it's ok with him," as he glanced at Vintage, who was staring at the young maiden.

Everyone turned to Vintage. Blushing, he looked away from her quickly and awkwardly said, "Yeah, of course. I mean, it's your car Jovius, so whatever is fine for me."

Everyone tried to contain themselves so as not to make the poor man blush anymore. Luz happily agreed to tag along with the crew.

## Chapter 10

The next morning was glistening with greenery as was typical for this part of the world. The traveling crew, now one larger, assembled in front of Jovius' brilliant flying monster and said their goodbyes to all those who would stay behind.

The remainder of the trip went smoothly. They talked, laughed, listened to music, and last, but not least, admired the breathtaking scenery. Canyons of red rock, valleys vividly colored, gentle slopes, thick forests, farms scattered in all directions, and celestial vistas passed by like out of a dream. It was all the more special for the visitor they called Vintage. This was because everyone lived in cities where he came from and going into the countryside was highly restricted in order to protect the earth, or so he was told.

It was the early afternoon as they rolled near their approach to Fire Lake. "Ladies and gentlemen, we will be reaching our destination in a few minutes. Fire Lake will never be the same!" Jovius roared as if addressing a large audience.

"The first time Fire Lake will have a person from the other side. This is historic!" Ray added.

"Why is it called Fire Lake?" Vintage inquired.

"Because the laws of nature are different there. It's the only place in the world where water can catch on fire, so be careful!" Jovius fired away in a friendly manner.

"Don't listen to him," recommended Luz.

"Don't worry, Luz, I already warned him," assured Sophia.

"I'm a quick study, don't worry," Vintage proudly stated. "You still didn't answer my question, though."

Ray explained that it was called Fire Lake because during the Summer Solstice, for three days, the sunset was perfectly aligned over the lake and the reflection appeared as if it were a raging fire.

"Sounds fantastic! I've never been to a lake before, or any other body of water for that matter. I've only seen such things in movies." Vintage explained.

All of his travel partners were blown away and didn't quite know how to react to such an inhumane absurdity.

"You're joking," said Jovius bluntly.

"Yeah, that's really not funny," Luz said in a sorrowful tone of disbelief.

Vintage assured them that he was dead serious.

"You're gonna learn a lot on this trip, that's for sure," Ray concluded.

Suddenly, the conversation was interrupted by a wondrous sight. An aircraft zipped by overhead and slowly began to disappear right before their eyes. Stunned, Vintage asked, "Does coffee make you hallucinate? I swear I just saw that thing disappear." Everyone else was near equally surprised by the fantastic sight.

"Must be new technology," Ray commented.

"This is gonna be one hell of a trade show," Jovius concluded while still in awe and peering up at the sky.

Another brief moment passed and suddenly Fire Lake came into view on the horizon. It was a wide oval in shape, nearly perfect geometrically, and absolutely perfect esthetically. It was surrounded by gentle green hills with scattered trees on all

sides and flowers abundantly visible as well. "Looks like paradise," Vintage softly expressed with eyes wide.

There was already a good crowd on hand as Jovius parked his delivery vehicle beside a weeping willow tree. It was a bizarre spectacle, to say the least. People of all sorts dressed in more styles than one can imagine. Musicians, tradesmen, farmers, children, techies, young, old, and everything in between were milling about conversing, working, relaxing, joking, and learning. Animals were in the mix as well, most roaming, some floating, and a few flying.

"Wow, I can't believe there's this many people here already," Ray said.

Jovius suggested, "It gets bigger every year. Let's start unloading the stuff from the back, make use of you loafers." Jovius pulled out a small electronic tablet and started quickly tapping his finger all over the screen.

"Sure, we work, while you play games," Ray toyed with his friend.

Jovius gave a broad grin and said, "I just need to check how many of my contacts are here already so I can start delivering. Looks like not many, but Tai is here, so that's good!"

"Tai's where?" came a voice from behind Jovius.

Startled, Jovius turned around and said, "Oh man, don't sneak up on people like that!" Both men laughed and gave each other a hug as it had been a while since they'd seen each other. Jovius introduced Tai to everyone in the group.

Vintage noticed something strange about the new addition to his slowly growing entourage. His words weren't matching the movements of his lips. "I don't want to be rude, but I have a question. Why does your voice continue after your lips stop moving?"

Ray took the initiative to do the explaining this time. "Tai's Chinese. He wears an electronic translator so we can communicate."

"So Tai, I've got a big haul for you this time, and I don't even know what half the stuff is! Maybe you can shed some light on it," Jovius prodded Tai as he continued to unload from the back of the truck.

Tai responded, "You don't know what it is? That's not saying much."

"Ha ha, everyone's a comedian. But really, what's all this stuff for?" Jovius said as he set one of Tai's heavy boxes in front of him.

"Just some supplies for the moon base, nothing too exotic," Tai explained with an understated tone.

"Wow, you're involved in one of the moon bases?" Luz asked with interest.

Tai explained that his cousin was part of a group that had set up a base a few years back. "It's amazing," he continued, "the maintenance takes more work than the original set up. Not all this stuff is for my cousin, though. I'm doing some maintenance on the hanging gardens, too."

"What are hanging gardens?" Vintage asked.

"Hard to sum up, really," Tai said. "I guess you could say that it's a blend of agriculture, architecture, and art."

"Breathtaking," Sophia chimed in. "That's how I'd sum it up, absolutely breathtaking."

"We'll be passing near there on the way to the next stop. We can take a scenic detour if you want," Jovius offered. "And if old man Tai here is up to it, maybe he'll give us the grand tour."

Tai laughed and said, "I'm barely forty!"

Tai caught Vintage peering at a strange mixture of tubes, coils, and wiring. "That's some spare parts for the life support generators used on the moon. Not exactly something you want to take chances with, ya know?" Tai said ironically.

"Tai, you wouldn't believe what we saw on our way here," Ray said excitedly as he helped Jovius set down a bulky box. "We saw an aircraft disappear just before we arrived! Have you heard of any technology like that?"

"Actually," Tai said with a bit of a smug look, "I was the one flying it. It's a cloaking project I've been involved with. We're still in the experimental stage, but we're really close to having a marketable product. Crazy stuff, huh?"

"That was you!" everyone exclaimed in unison. "Wow, but that's nothing compared to what they make where Vintage is from," Jovius joked.

Tai smirked, "Is that right? God forbid."

Curious, Vintage inquired, "What makes you say that?"

"No offense," Tai answered, "But I don't want violent, mind-controlled slaves having technology on par with what I have at my disposal. Dangerous stuff if it falls into the wrong hands."

Jovius stopped working and had a eureka moment look on his face. "I've got an amazing idea. Vintage, my dear man, you want to make some money?"

"Careful, Vintage," Sophia warned, "The last time he said something like that to Ray, Ray ended up facing a less than desirable situation, to say the least."

Ray rolled his eyes and complained, "I thought we weren't going to talk about that."

Jovius stared down the defiant little Sophia and said, "Oh, always bringing stuff up. That was a long time ago."

"What happened?" Luz excitedly asked.

"Not important," Jovius nipped it in the bud. "Anyway, Tai, Vintage here has been enlightening us as to the workings of his side of the planet. Oftentimes the folly of such a life, or slavery I might say, is comical, in a tragic sort of way, of course. Vintage, my man, how about you go on stage with me? It'll be a riot! I'll prompt you for info and it'll just roll from there!" Jovius was pacing around and obviously quite intent on carrying this through. You could see the thought energy bouncing around in his mind through his eyes. Everyone giggled a bit at the thought.

"I hate to admit it," Ray said in a chiding tone, "But that's actually a really good idea, Jovius."

"Well, I've never been on stage before," Vintage searched for excuses. He wasn't really afraid to be on stage, talking in front of a large crowd, or so he thought.

"Come on man, you'll love it. It's a great feeling, making people laugh, even if it is at your own expense."

"Great pitch," Tai smugly interjected.

"And who knows? If we're a hit, and we will be, and you like it, we can have a regular act. You were worried about finding some income, finding your niche, right? Well, here's a golden opportunity," Jovius pressed on.

Vintage glanced nervously at Luz. He wanted to impress her and this might be a good way to do it, plus the money would be nice. He hated feeling like a freeloader. "All right, count me in," he reluctantly said.

Everyone roared with approval and gave their new friend a slap on the back.

Later that night, a large crowd was assembled for Jovius' show. Jovius was a fairly well known comedian and always drew a good crowd, especially at trade shows and festivals. It was a starry night with a brilliant full moon shining down on Fire Lake. The crowd was gathered in a rustic outdoor stone amphitheater. There was a palpable flow of energy in the air and everyone could feel it. No one in the crowd knew, however, what kind of a rare show they were in for. They were about to meet Vintage.

Jovius was standing with Vintage near the back of the stage entrance. He decided to give his version of a pep talk. "Listen Vintage," he said as he put his arm around the slightly nervous newcomer, "I'll lead the way with the questions. All you have to do is give honest answers. Not only will the crowd love it, but you'll get paid, and most importantly, I think you might learn some infinitely important information. Just answer the questions. Got it? How do you feel? Ready to roll? Excited?"

Trying to hide his obvious apprehension, Vintage gave a shaky headbob and smile.

"I can't hear you!" yelled Jovius ironically.

"Yes, I'm ready!" Vintage yelled back with a grin.

"Ok, let's do this! Let's go!" Jovius urged as they headed up the steps and into the spotlight.

Jovius began, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! For those of you who know me, I'll be honest, I'm surprised to see you came back for more! For all my new victims in the crowd, my name is Jovius, purveyor of liquid spirit of the spoken word. All of you will be witnessing a historic event tonight! I am proud to bring you, from the other side of the world, Mister Vintage! Everyone give a great hand for this brave soul as he treads the murky depths of the stage with I, Jovius!"

Everyone cheered and clapped wildly as they sipped on various libations and smoked an assortment of concoctions. Vintage timidly smiled and waved to the crowd. Jovius was grinning from ear to ear and banging his hands together fanatically.

Jovius continued, "So let us begin, my dear Vintage. You are from the other side of the world, is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Is it true that you have government where you come from?"

"Yes, of course."

"Fantastic. We couldn't live very well without government, now could we?" Jovius asked in a silly tone as he rolled his eyes at the crowd.

"Government is quite important, I must say."

"I agree! I'm sure everyone here agrees, actually! If anyone in the crowd thinks that government is not important, please throw some fruit at me and be done with it!"

Jovius paused for effect. No fruit or other objects came in his direction, so he felt it safe to continue. "I'm glad everyone here is so well educated!" Jovius yelled with wide eyes. "Now, my good friend from afar, would you do us all the honor and tell us the root meaning of the word government?"

"Well," Vintage began, then paused. He didn't have a working definition exactly.

Jovius began to tap his foot and look at his watch to count the seconds. "Hmmm, my dear fellow, you seem to be struggling to define the term which we have deemed so absolutely essential. I understand, though. You've had a long trip, you're tired, perhaps you've had one too many victuals. I'm sure our friendly crowd here will understand, especially the part about the victuals, am I right?" he asked the crowd and motioned his hand to signal them to answer. A resounding 'yes' rippled through the magical night air.

"I'll tell you what I'll do then. I'll go ahead and define that for us. The etymological root of the word 'government' is from the ancient language known as Latin. The first part of the word is from the Latin 'Gubernare' which means 'to control'. And the second part is from the Latin word 'mente' which means 'mind'. So, what does that come to in this linguistic equation, ladies and gentlemen, shout it out please!"

"Mind control!" yelled the crowd emphatically. Jovius smiled broadly and applauded the crowd heartily. "Yes, yes, yes, government literally means mind control! Now, Mister Vintage, now that we've got the meaning of government, may I ask you another question about your world?"

"Yes, of course!" he yelled with apprehension.

"Very good, my man! Stick with us. Where you come from, do you have external government or internal government, my good man? We wish to be enlightened about your wondrous way of life!" he yelled as he was now pacing back and forth raising his arms in the air to pump up the crowd.

As nearly always happens when one becomes nervous and a bit agitated, Vintage blurted out the first thing which came to mind, which was the answer that had been relentlessly repeated into his consciousness since birth. "Government is external, I suppose."

A loud rush of laughs and disbelieving 'awwwws' swept through the crowd. Was this guy for real?

Jovius was laughing heartily and with a wrinkled nose and eyes nearly shut he exclaimed, "Ohhhhhh, noooooo! Oh, my good man! What makes you say that government is external? Please shower us with more bubbling wisdom! Why external?"

"I dunno," Vintage shrugged, "All sorts of people and buildings exist externally to make government, so it seems like the logical answer to me."

This brought thunderous waves of laughter from the hyper crowd, who chuckled deep in their souls right along with Jovius. Jovius himself was nearly falling over himself. Finally containing himself, Jovius continued the dialogue, "So dear traveler, we thirst for more! Based on your response, is it true that you have people controlling your mind?"

Before Vintage could answer, a shout came from the crowd, "Don't forget buildings!"

Jovius pointed at the man in the crowd and said, "Thank you, you're most diligent! Yes, and buildings!" he yelled as he raised his index finger high in the air.

Unsure what to say at this point, Vintage replied, "Well, no, people don't control my mind, and neither do the buildings. They just help keep order with laws, that's all."

The crowd was in fits of uncontrolled delight at the ludicrous statements this man was making.

Jovius continued, "It appears you have contradicted yourself! You say that the government doesn't control your mind, but the meaning of government is mind control and you clearly stated that people and buildings make up the government where you come from! Ladies and gentlemen, we have a contradiction! A contradiction!" he yelled emphatically as he jumped around wildly on stage.

A plethora of gasps echoed through the audience. A contradiction indeed! Jovius was on fire and played to the crowd, "Here on this side of this beautiful planet, we have internal government, not external! We control our own minds!" "Now," he continued in excited tones, "Before we continue, I want you to take a deep breath because you look a little out of sorts. Would anyone from the crowd be kind enough to give this man a towel? He's getting a bit excited up here, as you might imagine!" Suddenly, a jovial young woman ran onto the stage, ripped her shirt off, and vigorously wiped Vintage's head and face with her discarded clothing. Jovius exclaimed, "Wow, a kind young lass has come to your rescue! Thank you, my dear! Now, where were we?" The woman trotted happily off the stage.

"Did everyone hear our wise Vintage here say 'they keep order with laws'?" A resounding yes came the reply. "So now I must ask, if you could possibly give us a rough idea of how many laws there are in your illustrious paradise?"

Vintage answered, "There are thousands of laws, everybody knows that." Vintage slapped his thigh and chuckled.

"Thousands of laws! My goodness, do you know all of them?" Vintage scoffed, "Of course not, that's not possible! Nobody could remember them all!" "Very well, my man, of course not. Would you indulge us with just one, please?" "Well, coffee is illegal."

The crowd was now out of control. Jovius feigned shock on his face and grabbed his chest as if he were having a heart attack. "Did you say coffee is illegal?"

"That's what I said."

"Oh wise one, do you know how laws work on this side of the world?"

"No, but I'd be quite interested to learn."

"That's what I like to hear, Vintage! We live in accordance with something called Natural Law!"

"What's Natural Law?" asked Vintage with deadpan innocence.

This stupefied the crowd. How could someone be so ignorant? Was he really from the other side, or was this an ingenious act?

"I'm elated you asked, my newfound partner in banter! I'm truly elated, as is our crowd, I'm sure! Natural Law is the law of the universe, of course! Natural Law is universal, non-man-made, binding, and immutable conditions that govern the consequences of behavior. Natural Law is a body of Universal Spiritual Laws which act as the governing dynamics of consciousness. Now, if we could examine your great and

wise coffee prohibition for a moment, dear sir. The basic moral law of the universe boils down to this. Don't harm or steal from others! Isn't it beautiful! Everything else is perfectly 'legal', to use one of your terms. However, anything in contradiction to Natural Law, such as man's law tends to be, is unlawful, wrong, and is not to be obeyed. So now I ask, does coffee harm others or steal from others?"

Even Vintage knew this obvious answer. "No, of course it doesn't."

"Very good! Somebody give this man a victual! Please, victuals, victuals!" he urged the crowd. An energetic young woman ran onto the stage and handed a misty green cocktail to Vintage.

"Thank you, my dear, how generous. And now, Vintage, here is the sixty-four thousand cups of coffee question! Why is coffee illegal, if you stated before that the laws in your utopia keep order? Can you enlighten us with an explanation? And for bonus cup number sixty-four thousand and one, can you say if coffee being illegal is in accordance with Natural Law?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Perhaps it's illegal so people don't have health problems from drinking it."

"Ohhhhhh! Wrong answer, my friend! You have the right to put anything in your body and nobody has the right to tell you that you can't! That, dear Vintage, is called FREEDOM!" he yelled as he pumped his fist in the air. The crowd went wild with cheers.

"Well, my friend, I don't want to completely sap your abundant mental energy, but would you be so kind as to indulge us in a bit more dialogue?"

"I'd be delighted!" Vintage yelled as he gulped down the rest of his cocktail.

"That's the spirit!" Jovius prodded his partner. "Where you come from, do people engage in trade amongst themselves?"

"Yes, it's a necessity, of course."

"Are there any laws regarding trade which impose restrictions?"

"Oh yes, you can't just trade with anyone. That would be chaotic."

The crowd, sensing the irony which Vintage obviously did not, that he was making such a statement at a trade show and festival, roared with laughter in utter disbelief.

"And so it appears that there are laws which restrict trade. Is that right?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"And how are these laws enforced?"

"Well, there are lots of people involved in trade laws. Lawyers, police, bureaucrats, lots of people. I'm not sure how it all works, really."

"Are these laws enforced under the threat of violence?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

"And how is this army of people calling themselves lawyers, police, and so forth, compensated?"

"They're paid with tax money."

There was a huge collective gasp in the crowd.

Jovius laughed and bellowed, "Tax? What is the definition of tax?"

There was no response.

"I can see you need some assistance. I hear the gears grinding in that pretty little head of yours. Don't worry, I'll help you! Not to fear! To tax means to make demands

on, burden, strain! So let me see if I have this straight. You strain and labor in order to pay people so that they can restrict your trade? You pay for your own unlawful restrictions, in other words?"

The crowd was oozing shock and awe in their laughter. How absurd!

"Well, it's not unlawful, but yes."

Jovius slapped his head and shouted in disbelief, "But have we not established that any of man's laws which are in contradiction to Natural Law are unlawful and not to be obeyed?"

"I suppose."

"To make sure that trade is allowed under Natural Law, let's answer one more simple question. Does trade hurt others or steal from others?

"No, trade is generally beneficial."

"Wonderful answer! So, it stands to reason, that trade is not to be regulated by man's law, is that right, my friend? If Natural Law has not been broken, then the action is lawful?"

"That seems to be correct, I suppose."

"And if man's law hinders your trade, which might contribute to your suffering, then it stands to reason that this so-called law violates natural law, causes suffering, and therefore should not be obeyed?

"That appears to be logical and moral, I guess."

"Then why do so many people obey so-called laws which cause suffering in your world?"

"That's a good question, I'm sure I don't know."

"The answer is simple, my good man! Your people obey man's law and take actions in violation of Natural Law because you have external government, which we have already established as external mind control!"

The crowd was awestruck with disbelief and on the verge of chuckled teardrops.  
"One last thing, my dear fellow! Do you, and people where you come from, know that murder is wrong?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Everyone knows murder is wrong!"

Jovius laughed and with wide eyes appealed to the crowd, "Don't be ridiculous, he says! Very well! Does murder happen often where you come from?"

"Well, it depends on where you live, but generally crime is fairly low, at least in my nation."

"Is it not true that you have large scale wars?"

"Well, yes, but war is different than murder."

The crowd roared with stupefied side-splitters. How audacious this man was!

"War is different than murder, he says! Are there not individuals taking the initiative to kill? Someone has to start the war, do they not? Or is there a special law you have to negate this logic?"

Vintage squirmed uncomfortably and was shifting his feet. "Yes, someone always starts it, that's true."

"Are those people murderers?"

"I don't know, maybe, I'm not sure," Vintage stuttered.

"Are murderers punished where you come from?"

"Yes, there are stiff penalties for murder."

"May I ask what these murderers wear, the ones involved in war?" Jovius asked, knowing full well the answer.

"Well, when there is a war, people wear special uniforms."

Jovius contorted his face in mock confusion and scratched his head. Beaming into the crowd with wide eyes he spoke, "So, are those people involved in war punished when the war is over?"

Vintage laughed nervously and in a cocky tone replied, "No, of course not! They wouldn't join the war if they thought they'd be punished for it!"

Jovius sarcastically yelled to the crowd, "Of course not, how silly! So, humor me for a moment my dear friend and let me see if I have this straight. People from your world know murder is wrong and are sometimes punished for it. However, if people wear a special uniform and call it 'war' then they are free to murder and receive no punishment?"

"Yeah, actually, those who take part in wars are often venerated."

Jovius was taken aback and hopped around on the stage in disbelief, "What! Venerated murderers! Endless contradictions! Endless, I say!"

The crowd roared with a mixture of fantastic delight at the absurdity but also with a twist of shock and disgust.

"Dear Vintage, may I ask, is there anyone that tells these murderers to go murder? I imagine the same crew give them the uniforms as well, is that true?"

"Yes, people from the government decide when to go to war and against whom."

"So individuals calling themselves government, which we know to be mind control, tell others to go murder. My dear man, if I tell you to go murder, would you do it?"

"No, of course not!"

"Not even if I give you a special uniform and say that the murder is for war?"

"No, you don't have that right. I wouldn't do it in a million years!"

"Do all people have equal rights?"

"Yes, of course."

"If all people have equal rights, and I cannot tell you to murder, then why can an individual from 'government' do it? Contradiction! Contradiction!" "Mr. Vintage, you've been a great sport! I can see your mind reeling a bit so we must now take our leave of the good people who came to see us. However, I leave you all with this. Natural Law rights create freedom, and anything opposing it causes suffering!" He then started chanting, "Freedom, freedom, freedom!" and the crowd exuberantly joined in the chorus. He blew kisses to the crowd and shouted, "You've all been amazing! Thank you, love and freedom to all! Take a bow with me, my friend!" he shouted as he grabbed Vintage's hand and they bowed together to the crowd. The crowd was clapping and continued chanting, "freedom, freedom, freedom!" with wild passion as Jovius and Vintage exited the stage area.

The dynamic duo were greeted excitedly by Ray, Sophia, Tai, and Luz at their campsite.

"Great show guys!" Ray exclaimed as he handed them cups of red wine by the fire.

Tai coolly said, "Careful, Jovius, this guy's gonna steal the show from you if you're not careful." All gave nods of agreement at the sarcastic proposition.

Sophia chimed in cheerfully, "Ray here has a wonderful gift of understatement, you guys were better than great, you were absolutely fantastic!"

Luz smiled at Vintage, took a sumptuous sip of wine, and said, "Yep, especially Vintage. He stole the show for sure!"

Vintage was having mixed feelings about the whole ordeal. On the one hand, he was happy that it was such a success and he was elated that Luz seemed to be showing such outward signs of affection towards him. However, he couldn't help but feel that he was an outsider, that somehow he was playing the part of the aw-shucks lovable dupe. It wasn't the most flattering of images for the ego to ponder.

"Thanks, yeah, that was a lot of fun," he said sheepishly as he twitched his fingers nervously and gulped some wine.

Sensing that something was amiss with their new friend, Luz touched him on the arm and batting her delicious doe eyes asked, "You want to take a walk? It's a gorgeous night." Vintage gladly agreed to the young maiden's proposition and the two went off together.

They were walking near the edge of the lake. It was a spectacularly clear night full of brilliant stars and the energy from the thousands of people in the area gave it a palpably positive vibe. Luz looked over the attractive stranger and stated softly, "You must be having a hard time, I can sense it." This made him nervous as he wasn't comfortable talking about his feelings, especially with someone he barely knew, and even more so due to his attraction towards her.

"What makes you say that?" he asked in an indifferent tone, trying not to appear bothered.

"Well, when I think of your situation, it seems obvious. You're away from home, in a strange place; everything is new to you, and not just the people, but all of these new philosophies and ways of living. Not only that, but you don't have any clear memories from your past. I can't imagine what you're going through!" she explained in a consoling manner.

"Amazing," he thought to himself. Beautiful, smart, kind, understanding, and intuitive. He looked at her as they continued to stroll side by side and was astounded to see her gazing at him in a whimsical manner. He stopped his stride and looked deeply into her eyes, "You read my mind, I'm afraid. Is that your job, reading minds?" he said with a sheepish smile a hint of sarcasm.

She smiled playfully and said, "Sometimes." He slowly reached for her silky face and gently pulled her lips into his. They spent the next few hours walking and talking the night away and swiftly falling in love.

A couple days later and the crew was back on the road towards the hanging gardens that Tai had invited them to. The trade show was a huge success, as always, and everyone had met new people, with good vibes all around.

The landscape had flattened out considerably and Jovius maneuvered his flying beast skillfully as the smooth grounds hectically passed by. He gave a not-so-subtle boost to the accelerator which caught everyone's attention.

"Trying to set some kind of record?" Ray chided his friend from the passenger seat.

"Nah, the record is already mine," Jovius lightheartedly contended. "No, but really, hanging gardens is a little out of the way from my route, so I'm going to make up some time so you guys have plenty of opportunity to take it all in."

From one of the back seats Vintage had a ponderous look on his face which Luz, sitting next to him, took notice and asked, "Something on your mind?"

"Yeah, just curious about something," he answered.

"Go ahead and spit it out, the way this crazy pilot is going, we might not have much time left," Sophia said with an ironic face.

"I was just curious as to why we haven't purchased any fuel yet. We've traveled so far and I haven't even seen any gas stations," Vintage commented innocently. Everyone laughed heartily at his expense.

"Gas stations? How archaic!" Luz shrieked as she nudged him in the ribs.

"How long has it been since gasoline has been used, Sophia? You're the historian of the group, so this is right up your alley," Ray urged his blond cutie.

"I am no such thing!" Sophia objected.

"It's been hundreds of years," Jovius answered. "You still use gasoline where you're from?" he asked with a hint of repugnance in his voice.

"Well, what do you use here?" Vintage asked. "Most people, at least that I know, use electric, at least here on the planet. Other fuels are more popular for interstellar travel. But here on Earth, there is a wireless electric grid throughout most places, with the exception of your primitive hemisphere, of course. So basically, most vehicles, including this fine machine you've been lucky enough to land in, charges itself wirelessly as we go."

"Yeah, the way you fly, Jovius, you chose wise words, 'lucky enough to land in' is spot on! I can't believe we haven't crashed yet!" Sophia shot a verbal arrow at her friend.

"Do you prefer that Vintage fly?" Jovius shot back.

"No, no! Let's get serious now! You're doing just fine, don't mind her," Ray came to Jovius' defense.

Vintage wanted to know more. "Not that any of you are experts in this field, but how does such a system operate?"

"Oh, that stings!" Luz yelped. "How do you know we're not wireless experts?"

"No offense," Vintage shrugged.

Ray explained, "It's true, though. None of us work on the maintenance of the system, but we know the basic concept of how it works. Basically, the way it works is a coil is placed in the ground to harness electromagnetic energy, which is then sent to a converter in order to streamline the raw energy into usable current, and finally a second coil acts as a transmitter. Long story short, the planet provides unlimited free energy."

"Gasoline!" Jovius heckled, "Unbelievable!"

"So, while we're on this subject," Sophia looked over at Vintage, "How does your gasoline system work? And I mean economically, how is it obtained and used, not how it burns and stinks. I get that part."

"It's pretty simple, actually," Vintage explained as he admired a farmhouse in the distance. "Oil is extracted, refined, and sold by the Point Of Light Energy Corporation."

There was an awkward pause. "You mean a monopoly?" Ray asked, dumbfounded.

"Yeah, the Divine Nation has a monopoly on energy. My nation tried to invade a long time ago to gain some control over their resources, but was quite the failure. All it did was drive prices up."

"Let me get this straight," Ray said with a look of derision at his new friend. "People went from your area of the world, with weapons, to another area of the world, and tried to take resources by violence?"

"Yeah, that's a reasonable summation," Vintage said casually.

"And how many people died?" Jovius snarled.

"Oh, I dunno, at least fifty thousand, I'd say," came the incredible answer. Everyone looked away in disgust.

"What? That was a small war! What's everyone so upset about?" Vintage asked, truly perplexed.

"Because it's an obscene violation of natural law, and caused a great deal of suffering, that's why!" Jovius explained with heated voice. Ray jumped in with slightly better checked emotions.

"Let's examine this for a moment. Perhaps a simple example will teach Vintage here a core principle of Natural Law."

"By all means," Vintage obliged.

Spotting a bag of apples in a storage space behind the rear passengers, Ray began, "Ok, Vintage. You see that bag of apples behind you?" Vintage peered back and gave the affirmative. "Who's apples are those?"

"I don't know, Jovius' I imagine, or whoever he's delivering them to. Why?" Vintage's handsome face was confused.

"Ok, I want you to kill Jovius and give me half the apples," Ray ordered as he pointed a finger at his friend.

"No, I won't do that!" Vintage objected.

"Why not?" Ray asked.

"Because it's not right."

"Even if I give you a funny uniform and a gun and tell you it's necessary?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Ok, if it's the wrong thing to do now, then it's the wrong thing to do always, understand?" Ray said convincingly.

"But sometimes it's necessary, you have to admit," Vintage countered.

"No! Offensive violence is never ok! It doesn't matter how many people are involved, either two or two billion! If something is wrong, then it's wrong! That one simple truth, my friend, is at the core of why we here on this side of the world, where we live in accordance with Natural Law and have voluntary, non-violent relationships, have so much peace and prosperity. It is also at the center of your world's troubles and suffering. You grossly violate the laws of nature. It's that simple!" Ray passionately expounded.

"Well said, my man, well said!" Jovius cried.

Vintage shook his curly head, "I see your point, and on a certain level it does seem simple, but how is it possible for everyone to behave so well and to not cause trouble? It seems like an impossible dream."

This amused everyone. Ray responded, "Well, we're living the dream, so what more proof do you need?"

Vintage conceded, "Yes, that much is clear, but how to get from a point where my world is to the point that your world has reached?"

Luz patted him consolingly on the back, "You're asking the right questions, and that's an important beginning. In order to reach our level of peace and prosperity, it must start with education, asking questions, and seeking truth. That is the only path to peace and freedom, my dear."

Jovius cracked a broad smile, "You've got a good woman there, Vintage. She's right. Now I must inquire, how does education work where you come from?"

Vintage answered abruptly, "That's simple. Education is performed in state agencies, like the Department of Caretakers, the Department of Work Prep, and the universities, of course." Appalling gestures cascaded throughout the faces of all passengers, except for Vintage, naturally.

"You give that kind of power to people you don't even know! Wow, it's worse than I thought!" Jovius shouted with derision.

"I'm suddenly feeling nauseous, can you land this beast and drive for a while?" Sophia pleaded, only half joking as she curled into a ball.

"How many hours a day do the children stay in school?" Luz asked as she braced herself for the horror of the expected response. A bit shocked, Vintage answered,

"Hours? Children are raised, practically from birth, in the state's care. It's much too important a job to leave it to individuals. Imagine the chaos! Children visit their parents once a month in order to keep the family bond, but all educational matters are in the hands of experts."

"Man, I am gonna throw up!" yelled Jovius. "Man, what a hell! Absolute hell!" Everyone looked out the window with gray faces of repugnance.

"I probably shouldn't ask this," Ray said with a deep sigh, "But what are people taught in school?"

Vintage answered casually, "Oh, the usual, I guess. You know, math, science, social studies, English, government..."

"A class called mind control, how quaint," Ray quipped. "Do they teach the Trivium?"

"Never heard of it."

"Bingo! There's one of your biggest problems!"

"What's the Trivium, and what's so important about it?"

"The Trivium, my friend, is a method for finding truth so that one may attain knowledge and intellectual self-defense, and also pass those skills on to others."

The confused look on their friend's face spoke volumes. "What is intellectual self-defense?"

"It's what keeps people from getting swindled. It keeps people from doing harmful things to each other out of fear, just because someone told them to," Jovius explained proudly.

"Can you give me an example?" Vintage asked, now growing quite curious.

"So people don't go to war or steal," Ray said bluntly.

"Let's use that war for oil as an example. You said that your nation invaded another territory in order to take resources through violence. How is it that so many people were convinced to go steal and murder? There must have been some reason given, right?"

"Well, it was all over the news for months about how the Divine Nation was going to cut off energy supplies. Since they have a monopoly, and we need energy, we couldn't allow them to cut us off. It would have meant death for millions!"

"So you were given information to strike fear into you, and it worked. People lined up by the millions to slaughter in the name of survival." "Another question," Ray continued, "Who does the average person buy gasoline from, directly, in your nation?"

"Well, let's see, Liberty Corporation gets it from the Divine Nation and then sells it to us, but Liberty Corp. is owned by Liberty Bank."

"And who owns those corporations and banks? And you also said there was an energy company in the Divine Nation, which controls the oil, do you know the name of that and who owns it?"

"I know that the Rockateller family owns most of Liberty Bank and Liberty Corp. along with the Creedy Family. As for Point of Light Energy, it's owned by the Rockatellers and Rothsmans, if I'm not mistaken."

Everyone groaned at the obvious. "I'm going to take a wild guess here, my friend. You said that you wrote for a newspaper, is that right?"

"Yes, the Free State Herald, that's right."

"And there is a television network where people also obtain news?"

"Yes, Free TV, finest in the world."

"Does Liberty Corp. own the newspaper and Free TV?"

"Well, yeah, Liberty Corp. and Liberty Bank own just about everything in the Free State, of course! It's always been like that, ya know. As long as I can remember, anyway."

"So, to be clear, media companies owned by Rockatellers convinced people to go murder people and steal oil from a company owned by Rockatellers?"

"Gee, I never really thought about it, but yeah!"

"And during and after the war, gas prices went up?"

"Yes, that was the unfortunate end result."

"I'll go out on a limb here and suggest that Liberty Corp. also manufactures weapons, is that right?"

"Yes, that's true. They own Liberty Tanks, Liberty Torpedoes, and a ton of other weapons manufacturers."

"Just out of curiosity, where does your so-called president get his funds from?"

"Mostly from taxes, but he also receives generous sums from Liberty Corp."

"And your schools, who funds and operates them?"

"Well, that's a little more complicated. It's more of a group effort amongst Free State resources, Liberty Corp., and a charity called the International Freedom Foundation."

"And who funds this foundation?"

"The Rockatellers and Rothsmans contribute to it greatly, but it also received public funds."

"Can you see the picture forming here, my dear friend? People where you come from are suffering and dying because they are tricked by some very crafty individuals. Out of fear and lack of knowledge, basically, millions of people, born free, are slaves under the yoke of a tiny cabal of ruthless psychopathic charlatans who understand the principles of Natural Law and the Trivium and hide these from you! This hidden knowledge they possess allows them to create a knowledge gap between the slaves and the masters. With the knowledge gap, a power gap is established, and with this power gap a wealth gap follows. In order to break this perpetual slavery, the knowledge gap must be closed, and The Trivium is a crucial key to doing this."

"I hate to interrupt, but everyone look out the window," Jovius said with wonder in his voice as he admired the rapidly approaching hanging gardens. "We'll be on the ground in minutes, hang tight," he instructed calmly. Everyone peered with awe at the breath-taking site before them.

"My heavens," said Vintage as his eyes danced to take it all in, "Gardens? It should be called hanging forest!"

Jovius set down the smooth flying beast next to the sleek oval shaped flight pod that Tai had arrived in just moments before. Tai was munching on a green apple as he casually approached the arrivals.

"You made good time, considering this primitive tin can you're flying around," he joked in his typical stoic fashion.

"Well, we can't all have fancy pods like that," Jovius said as he motioned to Tai's experimental vehicle.

"Is that the phantom we saw disappear earlier, the one from the trade show?" Ray asked.

"The one and only," Tai gleamed with pride. "Come on," he said with a mouthful as he motioned them to follow, "Hanging gardens welcomes you."

It was the most bizarre collage of art that Vintage had ever seen. Everything was natural, plants, trees, flowers, shrubs, vines, and various other types of greenery. But this was no ordinary flower garden. Many varieties were suspended in the air and arranged to make a picture.

"Look up there, about twenty feet up, to your right," Tai recommended as everyone gazed upwards at the splendor. There was a giant floating hummingbird made completely of flowers. Next to that was what appeared to be a long, winding, blue river, which was also made of flowers.

"I'll ask the obvious question," a stunned Vintage said, "how are they floating?" Tai grinned and answered, "Each flower is equipped with a hover chip."

"A hover chip?"

"Yeah, a hover chip is designed to make whatever is attached to it float, within weight limits, of course."

There were also various patterns formed with greenery on the ground, but the vast majority was hovering above them. There were various animals carved out of hedges floating about and also some abstract art which was equally fascinating. "You did all

this?" asked the dumbfounded guest of honor. Everyone thought this was funny in a naive sort of way.

"No," Tai answered, "I couldn't do this alone in a thousand years. This is the work of many people from all over the region."

"Wow, how is it financed?" came another naive question.

"Haven't you learned anything, yet?" Jovius scolded with love.

Tai shook his head in disbelief, "Most of the work done here was done for the joy of it, the joy of art, the joy of creation. Not everything needs financing, and especially not your conception of it. Some people who do regular maintenance on the entire property get some form of compensation, but most people make a design, contribute what they want, and that's the end of it. It's to take part in something greater."

"Is that a giant dragon?" Luz screamed. Sure enough, there was a colorful dragon off in the distance, one you might see in ancient Chinese art. This one was different than the other stunning works surrounding the crew. It was actually moving.

"Ok, Tai, how do you explain that one?" begged Vintage.

"Simple," he explained proudly, "The hover chips are programmed to make certain movements, left and right, up and down, very basic. It makes the dragon look as if it's really slithering through the air, but it's all a technological illusion. I did that one myself. You like it?"

"Wow, Tai, and here I thought you were just a geeky scientific type, but here you are, a jack of all trades!" Jovius yelled as he slapped Tai on the back.

Sophia caught Vintage looking up whimsically at some of the floating art wonders.

"Earth to Vintage, are you there?" she asked ironically as she waved in front of his face.

He smiled smartly and said, "I was just thinking about all of the new information I've come across on this trip, most notably from our stage performance and the ride over here." Everyone turned their attention to the rookie logic and morals student.

"Yes, go ahead," Sophia urged.

"You say that everyone here is familiar with Natural Law and lives in harmony with it." Luz interrupted, "For the most part, it's not perfect, and there are sometimes rare exceptions."

"Ok, that said," Vintage continued, "Who are the teachers and who are the students?"

Jovius slapped his friend on the back and replied, "Excellent question, and the answer is quite simple. Everyone is a teacher, and everyone is a student. When we're children, we are more of a student, and when we are adults, we are more of a teacher. There are solid laws of nature which everyone knows and abides by. These are always taught to the young. But on a wider spectrum of knowledge and learning, people never stop learning. The day we stop becoming students is the day we perish."

Vintage nodded and his eyes shone with understanding. "But how, if I may ask, is it possible for everyone to abide by the law?"

Tai jumped in and stoically replied, "That's a simple answer yet again. The basic truth that not living in harmony with Natural Law brings suffering is enough to make most people obey. And the really beautiful thing about Natural Law is the simplicity in which it operates. It boils down to two things, really. Don't harm others

through violence, theft, or fraud. That's all people have to do in order to have peace and prosperity. Simple, beautiful, and effective."

"But people couldn't have always been like that on this side of the world," Vintage challenged.

"Absolutely not," Ray said emphatically. "Obviously, all people of Earth have the same roots in the past. We don't know when that wall was built, or who built it. What we do know is that over many centuries before and after the wall, Natural Law was learned, in a painstakingly slow process, generation after generation. Gradually, over time, a majority of the population came to understand and live in harmony with Natural Law, and since that time, peace and prosperity have reigned over here, while the opposite has happened where you come from, which is most unfortunate."

Jovius stated bluntly, "It took a lot of learning, pain, and suffering before people could put their old, fearful, ignorant, and destructive ways behind them. What it takes, my friend, to make such a change, starts with each individual. Each individual must use his will power to change himself first, then after this is accomplished, one can help others to find truth as well. It takes will power, which comes from the mind. It takes care, which comes from the heart. And it takes right action in the world in accordance with Natural Law. When you have those things, positive change is possible, and as you can see, what this has made possible the last few hundred years on this side of the planet, is nothing short of breath-taking."

Vintage smiled and nodded in appreciation, "I'd like to learn more, if you all are willing."

Luz put her arm around him and said, "We'll be more than happy to teach you, but for now, just enjoy the moment and soak it all in."

As they continued to walk through the densely adorned gardens they came across a small group of people seated in a circle on the ground. Tai signaled for everyone to stop walking, "Let's go a different way. I don't want to disturb them." They changed to a different direction.

"I don't understand, what was happening back there? Why can't we go that way?" Vintage asked.

Tai explained, "It's not that we can't go over there, it's just better if we don't, out of respect. They're meditating and we shouldn't disturb them." Vintage tugged at his chin and obviously was unfamiliar with the term 'meditation'.

"You don't know what mediation is?" Luz asked, nearly in shock.

"I'm afraid not," he replied.

Tai gave a brief description, "Meditation is a spiritual exercise used to sooth the mind and emotional centers. It is a common practice on this side of the world and the hanging gardens is one of the most popular places for meditating. You don't have anything similar where you come from?"

Vintage gave it a bit of thought, wrinkled his nose and said, "No, not really. We don't have religious practices where I come from."

Jovius, shocked, replied, "Whoa! Who said anything about religion? Tai, did you say anything about religion?"

"Certainly not," Tai confirmed.

"And, my friend, I beg to differ that you don't have religious practices where you come from," Jovius continued with hands on hips.

"Well, you got me there on a technicality, I guess. There is no religion in the Democratic Free State, but there certainly is in the Divine Nation, of course. But I'm not from the Divine Nation," Vintage conceded as he stopped to admire a rose pyramid.

"That's not what I meant," Jovius retorted. "Everyone on your side of that wall has the two most destructive religions in the history of man. Can anyone name them for the grand prize?" Jovius asked in a loud and smug voice. Sophia jumped up and down with her right hand stuck high in the air like a child waiting to be called on. "The lovely young lady hopping like a bunny, for the grand prize, what is the answer, please?" Jovius proceeded.

"The two most destructive religions ever are authority and money! Now where's my prize!" Sophia answered and stuck out her hand to receive her prize. Jovius improvised and grabbed a lemon from a fruit tree nearby. He handed it to her proudly and thanked her for playing.

"Hold it, hold it, now just a minute," Vintage shook his head in disagreement. "Just how is authority a religion?"

"Perhaps you'd prefer to call it a set of beliefs," Ray joined in as he admired a floating cactus array. "And just to clarify further," Ray continued, "It should be noted that 'external authority' is a belief system. However, internal authority, the authority you have to govern yourself, is real. Remember, others do not have the right to govern or control you, therefore any belief in that external authority is a fallacious belief."

"Don't forget destructive," Tai added.

"How is it destructive?" Vintage asked.

"Remember our talk about war?" Jovius responded with wide eyes. No response came, just a look of bewilderment. "People go to war, ultimately, because someone orders them to and people believe, falsely, that they must obey the so-called authority. Authority does not exist in nature, however. It is a belief system used to control the mind. You believe that you must obey external authority, but it is a false belief." It became apparent that the light was starting to come on in Vintage's head. He had an 'ah-ha' moment.

"Ok, I'm starting to see where you're going with this, but what about money? Money exists, so how is it a belief system?"

Jovius patted Vintage on the shoulder and said excitedly, "Good, now we're starting to get somewhere! Good question! Ray, you're the so-called 'money man', so how about you take this one."

Ray laughed sheepishly, "Really? I'm the 'money man' huh? Ok, I guess since I'm the so-called 'expert' I'll gladly explain the religion of money and how it is destructive." Jovius led the group in mock clapping and blurts of 'bravo' to urge Ray on.

"Ok, ok, where to begin. Let's see. The first thing you might be thinking is that we use money here on this side of the world and that you've heard us refer to it as money, is that right?"

Vintage nodded and said while scratching his head, "And it seems a bit hypocritical, if you ask me."

"Ok, so let's clarify," Ray continued, "Our method of exchanging goods, services, commodities and so forth we still refer to as 'money'. That's true, but this is due to the ancient use of the word and after so many countless generations being accustomed to using the word 'money', for lack of a better term, we still use it, unfortunately. What we really do over our trade networks is every person, family, or group has certain things they offer on the market and these things are noted electronically in one or more networks for availability to trade. Remember, not everyone chooses to take part in a system like this. They don't believe that it is necessary for their survival or happiness, and they are correct. Many people and families live quite happily outside of trade systems, or at least complex ones. The key here is that everyone knows that 'money' is not necessary to live and be content. Everyone on this side learns at a very young age that self-sufficiency is desirable and sometimes necessary, and therefore, 'money' is not necessary. To believe that a happy life is not possible without money is the enormous and destructive belief. Where you come from, the belief that money is absolutely necessary is shared by all, is that right?" Vintage conceded this point. "And to have this belief causes people to have fear of being without money, because they believe that if they have no money, they and possibly their families will suffer. This belief is so strong that, in order to avoid pain and suffering, people follow orders from so-called authorities, violating Natural Law rights constantly. The irony here is that violating such rights does actually cause harm and suffering. War, famine, imprisonment, the list goes on, authority and money work hand in hand to make these sad situations a reality. To take it a step further, is it possible for you to create your own methods of exchange where you come from, my friend?"

Vintage explained, "Certainly not, you can go to prison for using false money."

"And who controls the money supply?" Ray asked.

"The three banks, of course. Liberty Bank, God's Bank, and Bank of His Majesty."

Everyone about burst into tears laughing so hard. "God's Bank!" Jovius cried, about falling to the ground.

"Wow, mind control sucks," Ray said shaking his head. "Anyway, this proves my point. The belief in authority and money in conjunction create a fearful environment in which millions of people suffer and die. In contrast, on this side of the world, exchange systems are voluntary. The belief in money and authority as being legit and necessary does not exist here, which are two key reasons why we have so much creation, peace, and prosperity."

Vintage had an impressed look on his face, "If I didn't see your way of living with my own eyes, I would never have believed it possible."

Luz spoke up and put her arm around him, "Yep, that's called mind control. Everyone where you come from is convinced that the way they live is the only possible way, and in many ways, the only desirable way to live. Their imaginations have been stifled. In order for things to change for the better, people must use their imaginations to create new possibilities."

## Chapter 11

Agent 0020 had a plan. At the moment he was walking a bustling street in the capital of the Democratic Free State. He glanced at the security cameras lining the streets as he walked smoothly towards his target, the Freedom Defense Authority headquarters. It was a risky move, going straight into one of the beast's principal hearts, but he felt it was his best option. The person he needed to talk to worked there and he would give it a shot. If they wanted him dead, there wasn't much he could do about it anyway. It had been less than 48 hours since he had found 0011 dead at the highly classified office. Now it was time to make a move. If he played his cards right, he might live and even make a significant chunk of change.

He vigorously trotted up the long flight of gray steps which led the way to the main entrance of the enormous marble columned building. He was stopped by two armed security guards at a large electric gate.

"State your purpose," one of the guards stated dryly.

"I'm here to see General Tool. It's quite urgent."

The two guards looked at each other before the second one spoke. "Is he expecting you?"

Not flinching and staring the guard directly in the eye, the young agent responded, "No, but I'm from the Freedom Intelligence Agency. I must speak with him at once."

The guards looked at him skeptically and whispered inaudible sounds to each other for a moment. Then one of them said, "Scan your tongue here," as he held up a small device. Reading the results on the device, the guard chuckled and said, "Says here you're a chef at the agency. What's the urgent matter, some rotten potatoes?"

Keeping his cool, 0020 replied in a stern voice, "Protocol dictates that all agency personnel are allowed to enter, no matter what my rank is. Do I need to talk to your superior?" The two oafs frowned and reluctantly opened the gate.

Once inside the gargantuan spiritless structure, Agent 0020 made his way to General Tool's office. He entered the double glass doors to his personal office and was greeted by his long legged secretary.

"Good morning, how can I help you?" she offered. He answered that he had an urgent matter to discuss with the general and that he also possessed something of great interest to him. The well-proportioned woman raised an eyebrow and said, "The general is busier than normal today. You'll have to be more specific."

Quickly glancing around the empty waiting room, 0020 tried to avoid irony in his reply. He didn't want to offend the gatekeeper, after all. "Tell him I'm from the agency. You can scan me if you like."

Looking him up and down, she put a finger to her bright red lips and said, "That won't be necessary. Have a seat please."

A few minutes later, the young woman called his attention and he was instructed to follow. They went through a maze of hallways, down a flight of stairs, made a couple more turns as they passed various computer rooms, and finally reached the spacious office of General Tool. The fat general with a bushy moustache was sitting at his oversized desk eating some popcorn as the two appeared at the double door entrance. With a broad smile General Tool spoke, "Thank you, my dear." She turned and walked

away. "Please, come in. I didn't get your designation." The young man began to salute but was cut off. "Please, don't salute me. Have a seat. Popcorn?" as he munched away. A bit surprised by the general's relaxed demeanor, he politely declined and sat in a plush brown leather chair.

"I'll be brief and to the point. I know you're really busy, sir," he informed the general.

"Busy? Did my secretary tell you that? Do I look like I'm busy?" the general replied with a belly laugh. "We say that to everyone to try and deter visitors, and work in general, pardon the pun."

Not sure how to respond to that, the agent went straight to his point. "I've got some information, highly sensitive information. Is this room secure?"

"Would I be sitting here, lounging around eating popcorn, if it weren't secure?" the tubby man replied.

Taking a deep breath, the agent continued. "I was part of a mission, phase one of which was just completed. For the first time in history, a man has been sent to the other side of the planet."

The general cut him off. "The other side of the black wall?"

"Yes, sir," 0020 continued as he started to sweat. "The purpose of this mission is to gather intel on the other side's technology so it can be replicated."

The general leaned back slowly in his giant cushy chair and set down his popcorn. "Why was I not aware of this mission?" he asked, not really expecting an answer. "And why are you, barely out of training I imagine from your looks, involved in such a monumental project?"

Nervously, the agent continued. "That's what I'm worried about, sir. When I delivered the access codes for the intel feed, I was supposed to be compensated, but that didn't turn out to be the case. Then I went to see my partner on the project at a top secret installation within two hours of the drop. When I walked in, he was dead at his desk. No blood. Real professional job. So now I'm thinking..."

The old general cut him off again and thoughtfully said, "That you're expendable."

"Exactly," 0020 confirmed.

The husky old general now leaned forward and leaned over his desk. "Who did you deliver the codes to?"

The agent's eyes darted around before his response. "Galvin Creedy."

Absolutely stupefied by the enormity of those words, the general let out a huge salvo of air. The general fixed his wide green eyes on the young operative and said, "And now you want protection." Keeping his eyes locked into the general's, 0020 nodded in affirmation.

The general looked away for a moment and scratched his bulky head thoughtfully. Turning back to his visitor, he gave a half-cocked grin and said, "Ok, let's see what you've got, before I make any promises."

The order follower did as he was told and pulled out a small electronic device. After touching a few buttons, the device lit up and he had access to the precious info. "I'll show you something you know is from the other side, to make sure you know I'm not fooling around." He searched through the archives of data already catalogued in the

closed system. "Here we go, this should be convincing enough. When was the last time you traveled like that?" He handed the device to the general and instantly his many chins dropped in astonishment.

"That car just turned into a flying machine!"

Looking over his shoulder, 0020 confirmed that it was so and also that, "It might be a good idea not to shout such things."

The normally jolly looking countenance of General Tool now took on a more serious look. This was world changing information and he was one of the few people who had access to it. The possibilities seemed endless, yet at the same time, quite dangerous. What was a man like Galvin Creedy going to do with such intel? What was he planning? And why was this low ranking little runt still alive? He didn't even have a name, just a number! So many questions!

"First of all," the general began, "I don't know how I'm going to protect you. Creedy is in the most powerful circles, so I can't guarantee anything, but I will try." He continued, "Secondly, I need time to figure out what to do with this information. Just sitting on it is far too dangerous."

The operative leaned back in the plush chair, exhaled slowly, and suggested, "We should change the password."

The general had a hearty laugh at this. "Do you have a death wish! They'll know who changed it!" The young man blushed from his simple-mindedness.

"Whatever info you have now, can you make a backup on a different device?" asked the general anxiously as he perspired a bit on his big brow. He received a confident nod in return. "Then the first thing to do, is make a backup. There is no time to waste. Also, if you can, make it automatically copy itself in real time. That would be even better."

"Absolutely, I'll get right on it. Can I use the facilities here?"

The general tilted his head and inquired, "That depends, can you cover your tracks?"

"Sure thing," came the confident answer. The general sent the agent off to one of the computer rooms to get started right away. After 0020 was gone, the general, nervous and excited at the same time, began to plot his next moves.

## Chapter 12

The presidential palace stood proudly gleaming on a hilltop overlooking the capitol city. It had a grand view of that mechanized city full of mechanized people. It was carefully placed to be easily observed and admired by the populace, but in a secure enough location to keep the hordes away if they got restless. The current president, Tyran Max, was as eccentric as they come. He had the palace painted all sorts of gaudy colors. On the grounds of the monstrosity were various exotic animals, some caged, some not. On special days of the year Tyran allowed people to visit the "Presidential Zoo", at their own risk, of course. The palace itself actually consisted of one gargantuan structure and two lesser palaces facing kitty-corner to the main one. On this day, however, it was a fourth structure, deep underground, in which some imminently important business was to be conducted.

Deep below the main palace in this underground complex was where President Tyran Max awaited his top military officer, General Tool. The underground haven was much grander than most dwellings of the commoners in the Democratic Free State. It had large, open spaces to conduct meetings, along with multiple bedrooms, kitchens, dining areas, sports facilities, and all sorts of colorful gardens kept in bloom year round by the miracles of science.

President Tyran himself was a young, tall figure, with a very light complexion, beady eyes, and a somewhat round and squishy clown-like face. He was leaning back in a plush purple lounge chair at the head of an enormous glass table which could easily seat fifty people. He had spread before him on the table various brilliant and elegant pitchers of coffee, tea, juice, and various other beverages. There were also large jars next to the pitchers. One was marked "sugar", another marked "salt", and a third labeled "not sugar or salt". Dressed in jeans, a Hawaiian shirt, and a giant sombrero, he looked anything but presidential. He took a small spoonful from the "not sugar or salt" container and quickly sniffed it. He then took another spoon of the white powder and stirred it into an oversized cup of coffee.

He swiveled anxiously in his chair and eyed the room. Four jumbo monitors, one on each wall, to keep watch of the compound. Four guards, one standing at each wall, and four secretaries, each wearing skirts a bit shorter than what might be considered proper, also standing along the wall. Growing impatient, Tyran hollered at a blond secretary. "Secretary 36D! Why isn't the general here yet? Can you check and see about his ETA? I'm a busy man, you know. A man like me can't be kept waiting!"

The petite young lady blushed and answered in a loud tone, due to the large distance across the ridiculous size of the conference room, "With all due respect, sir, he's not due to be here for another five minutes!"

"Yeah, I knew that!" he arrogantly shouted back. Just then on one of the monitors, the general was seen being escorted down the corridor on his way to the conference room. At the sight of the overweight general, Tyran rudely joked, "He don't walk, he waddles! Look at that! Ain't that funny!" Noticing the lack of laughter from the company in the room, he spoke with feigned indignation, "Well, don't ya'll think that's funny!" Everyone in the room then showed some teeth and let out a forced belly laugh.

"There, that's more like it!" the president approved as he clapped his hands like a child and made his way towards the large steel door to greet the general.

General Tool was huffing and puffing by the time he reached the entrance. Tyran greeted the general with a hearty and overzealous handshake and spoke with a hurried gusto, "Hey fat ass, good to see you again! You need some water?" Then, turning to one of the secretaries continued yapping, "Hey, get this man some water before he passes out!"

"That's not necessary," assured the giant.

"All right, you heard the man, everyone out! Out, out, out!" Tyran ordered the group.

Confused, the general said, "But I didn't say that."

Tyran burst out laughing and, slapping the general on the back, said, "Of course you didn't! You calling me a liar?" The general wasn't sure what to say so he kept his mouth shut. All the secretaries and guards left the room and secured the giant steel door behind them.

President Tyran and General Tool sat down at the shiny table. "This is a most urgent matter, which is why I requested to meet in the underground," the huge man began. Tyran said that he was quite anxious to hear the news as this was the first time General Tool, or any military officer for that matter, had requested such secrecy. The flabby officer then went on to explain exactly what information had fallen into his hands the day before. He gave all the details of what had transpired with agent 0020. Excitedly, the eccentric president declared with glee, "That's a game changer right there, yes it is! Time to put our thinking caps on!" He then reached for the "not sugar or salt" container and sniffed another hearty spoonful.

"So what's our next move?" the general inquired as he leaned heavily on the table.

"Hold that thought!" Tyran shouted as he pushed a button on a transparent screen embedded in the table.

An exotic young mocha-colored maiden quickly ran into the room and, without saying a word, started rubbing the shoulders of Tyran. Due to the highly sensitive nature of what they were discussing, the general felt he had no choice but to suggest that maybe they should remain alone. "Oh, don't worry about her! She won't say a word, I promise!" Tyran happily informed his guest as he grinned with pleasure from ear to ear.

"How can you be so sure?" asked the perplexed general.

Leaning back in his purple chair with a shit eating grin on his face and eyes half closed, Tyran replied, "I'll have her killed, of course." The girl instantly started trembling and crying, so the president turned around to comfort her. "Oh, darlin, I was just joking around with my friend here. I'd never do that to you, sweetheart!" he stated with a devilish grin. This calmed the girl and she resumed her methodical rubdown of the president.

General Tool heartily disapproved of such sloppy security measures, but what could he do? After all, Tyran was the president, so he could do just about anything. However, he couldn't help but second guess himself for telling this erratic clown such world-shaking information. Oh well, nothing he could do now. Back to business.

"So what should we do about 0020?" Tyran got a wild-eyed look in his eyes, put a thoughtful finger to his chin and asked, "Is he useful?" The general sighed and said he was of the opinion that the low-level agent would cease to be useful as soon as the backup data storage was ready to go. "After that," the general continued as he leaned back in his plush sky blue chair, "I can't think of much use for him."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the giddy president. "Then we'll have him killed immediately after he's done setting up all the technical stuff!"

Unflinching, the general agreed that this was probably the best course of action. Turning his attention to the masseuse, the jumpy politician grinned wide and relieved her of her duties. She bowed respectfully and started walking away. "Wait!" shouted the president. "I'm sorry, where are my manners? Would you like a little backrub, general? She's quite adept." Preferring to speak in private, the general denied his desire to be touched by the youthful beauty and politely refused.

As soon as the girl left the room, Tyran pressed another button in the table and a voice came over a speaker embedded in the floor.

"Yes, sir," came the voice of one of the guards outside.

"Did you see the young masseuse that just left?" The guard confirmed that he did. "Fantastic. Please follow her and kill her in a discreet manner," Tyran nonchalantly ordered while licking his lips.

"Yes, sir," came the reply.

"Oh guard, and please send in the finest bottle of whisky we have on hand. It's time to celebrate!"

"Would you like me to do that before or after I kill the girl, sir?"

Rolling his eyes at the general, Tyran said, "You kill the girl right away, and have someone else bring the whisky. Do I have to think of everything?"

"My apologies, sir. Thank you for clarifying." Tyran hit a button in the table to cut communication.

"So where were we?" asked Tyran in a casual tone as if he had just ordered a pizza instead of a murder.

The general, after several years of working with the moody tyrant, still wasn't accustomed to the detached brutality his boss exhibited so he tried to not show his shock on his face. "We were talking about killing the agent," the general re-focused their nefarious planning efforts.

The president was tapping his fingers in a nervous manner on the table before he burst out, "Where's that damn whisky!" Right on cue, a long faced man servant entered the room with a brilliant bottle which appeared to be cut from diamond and two fine rocks glasses which he promptly set in front of the schemers.

Tyran eagerly picked up the bottle and poured two generous portions of the potent liquid confidence. He handed one of the drinks to the general, who couldn't bring himself to refuse. He simply released a powerful jetstream of air, tilted the glass back, and slammed it down in one swift motion. "Atta boy!" approved the fearless leader of the Democratic Free State, who dually retired his drink in one gulp. Slamming his fist on the table, Tyran eyed the giant general across from him. "Ok, so here's what we do. After whatshisface finishes setting up the auto backup and we have access, then we have him bumped off, then." The wise leader quickly got a blank look on his face as he looked

inquisitively at the floor for a moment. "Then," he resumed, "We'll need to get some of our best scientists involved so they can copy the technology they see from the other side."

There was an awkward pause before the general broke the silence.

"Then what, sir?"

President Tyran Max released a malevolent cackle and slapped the mammoth man on the back. "That's when the real fun starts, that's what!"

## Chapter 13

Sitting on an immense golden throne sat the great King Sitan. The king himself was wearing his customary long, flowing crimson robe, adorned with priceless jewels. On his head was a tall, intricately designed crown with many golden animal ornaments dangling from all around. At the top and center of the crown was a golden snake. In any sane world, he would have been a good show at a circus. Unfortunately, the world King Sitan ruled was far from sane.

He was a short and pudgy king, with salt and pepper hair, a broad smile, and a lengthy gray beard. On this day he was sitting on his throne, staring into a camera and giving a passionate speech to the people of the Royal Region. “We have won many battles! We must be strong in our conviction and solidarity. We will win this war. We will drive out the enemy! The great nation of your immortal king will soon be victorious against our Free State enemies!” Suddenly, his eyes widened in a panic, he clutched his chest and struggled to breathe. Slowly, his chin dropped and he sat motionless on the throne as his eyes closed for eternity.

“Cut! cut! cut! Thank god we’re not live! Someone check his pulse, just to be sure!” shouted an exasperated director as he jumped around behind the camera. On the production set where the newest speech of King Sitan was being filmed there were various people scurrying around, pounding at keyboards, adjusting lights, and doing countless other tasks to make the show possible.

The director quickly phoned the Royal Network headquarters to speak with his boss, Rusty Wizard. “Wizard here,” came the impatient voice over the phone.

“We’ve got a problem. The king just died during filming. We need a replacement fast. It’s supposed to air tomorrow night!”

Mr. Wizard laughed a bit and yelled, “Well, that wasn’t in the script! Poor bastard didn’t even get to retire.” Then, calmly, he continued, “Ok, I’ll take a trip to the science department today and get the next immortal ready for action. Just hang tight.”

An hour later and Rusty Wizard was at the Royal Science Department. He confidently strode through the halls past various offices, labs, break rooms, and administrative cesspools. He walked into the sleek office of the department’s director, Wells Russell. Without hesitating, he flashed past the plump secretary and walked straight into Director Russell’s private room. “Don’t you people knock?” said the stocky Russell while flinging his mop of brown hair back.

“No time for pleasantries, Wells. The immortal King Sitan just kicked the bucket.”

A distressed look invaded Mr. Russell’s pointy face. “Oh dear, it wasn’t live, was it?” Mr. Wizard informed him it wasn’t. Breathing a sigh of relief, Russell held up a hand, “Stop, I know what you’re here for now, by god. We must get to the training area immediately!” Following this, Wells quickly punched a code into a black device on his desk and the floor slowly began to open. As it crawled backwards towards the director of the Royal Network, a bright light showed the way down a spiraling staircase.

“Oh, one thing before we go,” the head scientist said with a bit of a glum hesitation. Before he could continue, Mr. Wizard cut him off.

“Is one ready? Please tell me one is ready.”

With a grimace of uncertainty, the pointy man of science replied, "Well, I believe so."

"You believe so? Might I say, Mr. Russell, that neither I, nor our bosses, enjoy the word 'believe', especially in a situation like this. We much prefer the word 'is'. Now is another damn clone ready or not!" Rusty gruffly shouted.

Growing a bit nervous, Wells Russell explained, "You see, physically, he is ready without question. However, there have been some issues with his personality."

"Issues?" asked Rusty.

"He is a bit more erratic than normal, that's all. I'm sure he'll be fine, it's just more trouble than we're used to. After all, through how many hundreds of years and how many clones has this immortal illusion been going now? Glitches are bound to happen sooner or later."

"I prefer later, but let me have a look for myself," Wizard said as he started down the staircase.

The staircase wound down a couple of floors where it ended in a long empty hall. The two anxious men walked directly to the end of the empty hall and both had their tongues scanned by a computer embedded in the smooth gray wall at the end of the hall. "Access granted," announced a synthetic computer voice and the wall to the left opened into a sprawling complex of laboratories. The well-hidden door closed itself automatically after the men stepped in. They walked to a thick metal door marked 'Sitan Only' and the men once again had their tongues scanned to confirm their identity. The computer again parted the doors for them and they stepped into a breathtaking palace.

A teenage version of the invincible King Sitan was the first to take notice of the newcomers. He sat up in his sparkling golden chair and raised a curious face from his book. "Hello, gentlemen. Might I ask your business here?"

Just as Wells was about to speak, a slender blond woman in a white coat appeared and said, "Hello, sir. What a nice surprise. What may I do for you gents?"

Her boss, Mr. Russell, replied, "No time for pleasantries, Head Clone Scientist 0200. We've got an emergency on our hands. We need to speak in private." The attractive whitecoat adjusted her spectacles and told them to follow her. They went into her small office and took their seats. "The king is dead," Russell announced, not wanting to waste time.

"Again?" she asked in a sarcastic tone.

Mr. Wizard joined in, "This is no time for irony, 0200. I need a new king on my set for a recording session ASAP. Do you have one ready?"

0200 let out a deep sigh, pursed her deep red lips and said, "Well, perhaps it'll be best just to show you and you can judge for yourself."

The two men nervously looked at each other as she rang the cloned king in the making's portable communicator. An answer quickly came, "Sitan 33 here." In a pleasant voice, she ordered Sitan 33 to come to her office at once.

A few moments later, a near-exact replica of the recently deceased King Sitan came swaggering into the room. "His nose is too big," complained the media producer.

"Off with his head!" screamed the newly crowned man.

"Excuse me?" the Wizard man defended himself.

In a soothing motherly tone, 0200 said, "33, that's not the way we say hello to people, now is it? Apologize to Mr. Wizard, please."

Looking unhappy at the notion, Sitan 33 grudgingly said he was sorry and, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Wizard. Where are my manners?"

"Indeed," lamented the head science officer of the nation.

Wells Russell took a deep breath and asked the new king, "Sitan, tell me about yourself, please."

The middle aged man smiled brightly and explained, "My name is King Sitan, immortal ruler of the Royal Region." There was a brief pause as he spaced out a bit, then resuming, "I play games. Do you play games?" Everyone else in the room looked at each other uncomfortably. Sitan continued, "On Monday my favorite color is pink, and sometimes on Sunday I wear nothing but white robes and count as high as I can count, and I always drink my milk. Don't you worry!" Then suddenly, "Duck and cover, the missiles are raining down! Death to all! Save yourselves!" as he flung himself on the floor and curled up into a ball.

"Well, at least he got his name right," quipped Wells.

Furious, the Wizard of the Royal Region stood up and with a blood red face screamed, "You expect this guy to pose as a king! Is his IQ even above room temperature?"

The clone popped up from the floor and smacked Rusty Wizard across the face. "What's your IQ there, Mr. Smarty Pants?" Rusty cocked an arm back and made a fist but the young blond interceded by stepping in front of the oblivious clone.

"His IQ is fine," she insisted. "It's his mild hallucinations that worry me a bit."

"A bit!" both visitors exclaimed.

"Well, look, he's the only one I have who's the right age right now. You're just going to have to make it work, Mr. Wizard."

Mr. Russell rolled his eyes upwards and shaking his head said, "You're gonna need a lot of tricks this time, Mr. Wizard. A plethora of tricks."

Wells, trying to lighten the mood, quipped, "Well, look on the bright side, kings don't need to be all that bright anyway." 0200 added, "Or sane for that matter."

Still in a bit of shock over the mammoth task ahead, Rusty looked at the pretty young scientist in disbelief. "How could this happen? I hope there's at least a reasonable explanation."

"Well, I guess now is as good a time as any to tell you," she said before taking a deep breath, "This degeneration will continue, unfortunately. Unless we can find a way to stop it, then it won't be too many years before we see a king who can barely talk."

Rusty grimaced and said, "I hope I'm long gone by then. But for the time being, is there anything else I should know about this schmuck?" "Actually, there is, I'm glad you reminded me."

Suddenly, Sitan 33 dropped to the floor and started doing pushups. "Gotta keep up my physique for the ladies!" he shouted. "He is a bit aggressive when it comes to the opposite sex."

Wells stepped in and in a hopeful voice said, "You mean like, he likes to hit on women? Most kings do, last time I checked."

"More like we've had to restrain him a few times."

"So to sum up," Mr. Wizard sadly said, "I've got to make a crazy hallucinating sexual deviant moron look like an upstanding supreme immortal leader."

Both scientists nodded in agreement and 0200 added, "That about sums it up, yeah." Mr. Wizard stated that, if there were no more pertinent information, he thought the conversation was finished and they should quit wasting time.

"Have him at the studio in an hour," the beleaguered Wizard ordered.

## Chapter 14

General Israel Osama al-Isis walked quickly and in a business like fashion as he made his way through the maze of the Divine Intelligence Center. He was tall with a smooth, confident stride and had his customary stoic look on his olive colored face. Taking a strong puff from his pipe, he had an extra spring in his step today. Something extraordinary had happened.

He stopped to scan his tongue at the entrance to his destination, an obscure corner office with blacked out windows on the second floor of the D.I.C. There were only two men in the room, both of whom stood up immediately to salute their commanding officer.

“Thanks for coming down so quickly, sir. I didn’t want to tell you too much over the phone, naturally.”

Puff, puff. The general responded with an emotionless face, “You did well, Communications Officer 2180. Please give me the details.”

2180 began, “Well, sir. This is Comm Tech number 3170 here. He came across a communication this morning like one we’ve never seen. Go ahead, son. Tell the general what you picked up on your scanner.”

The young bug eyed communications technician spoke in an excited manner. “Well, sir. I had to triple check it just to be sure, because I couldn’t believe it myself. This morning, I picked up a video transmission from the other side of the world. This is an historic day!”

The general’s demeanor didn’t change except for a wrinkling of his nose which caused his thin jet black moustache to wiggle. Puff, puff on the pipe. “Where are these signals being sent?” asked Israel Osama al-Isis as he narrowed his eyes at the giddy young man.

“They appear to be targeted at the Democratic Free State, sir.”

The general remained stoic. “What is the nature of these videos?”

“They appear to be first person footage, running constantly. Everywhere the camera goes, we get a first-hand look at the other side.”

The general twitched his moustache again, this time due to a smirk of pleasure. “Interesting,” commented the general. “Will you be able to record the video in real-time?” he continued.

2180 happily interjected at this point, “We’re already recording, sir. Every last bit.”

The general took a deep breath.

“Might I add, sir, that from what I’ve seen so far, their technology is out of this world,” 2180 commented excitedly. “No pun intended, sir. My apologies.”

The general took pause for a moment. He then asked to see some of the technology that the officer was referring to. The young tech started pounding away at a keyboard and soon a large screen appeared out of the wall facing the men. “In this first part here, you can see that they have some type of transforming flying machine,” 2180 pointed out on the screen. The general didn’t flinch.

“What more?”

"Well, sir," 2180 said, "Take a look at this. It appears they have matter which can change itself on command. And if you look here, the wall magically changes color. And this is only from a few hours of transmissions!"

The general gave an unemotional look to his subordinates and said, "Thank you, men. Good work. Have a feed into my private office within the hour. And not a word to anyone else about this."

One final puff, then he turned and methodically made his way towards his next meeting.

## Chapter 15

John Gray wore round spectacles on his round face and had a typically unimpressive physique that comes with working long office hours behind a desk. Today he was awaiting a very important guest, one who could make or break anyone he wished. He repeatedly flicked his pen on his desk out of nervous habit. He was not a patient man, but he was extremely cunning and methodical. These qualities gave him very fine employment at the International Freedom Foundation. He was an indispensable part of the machine, possibly more important than his financiers, or so he liked to think.

Bursting through the door unannounced came John Rockateller. Mr. Gray rose from his seat and greeted his boss, "John, good to see you. Would you care for anything?" Mr. Rockateller declined.

"I had plenty in the limo on the way over. Let's get down to business." Rockateller began, "The war will be over within the next year. We're pulling some of Tyran's funding to force him to withdraw."

John Gray leaned forward on his desk and took a deep breath. "Please," he started, "Before you continue, did you hear about Sitan yet?"

Rockateller gave a perplexed look and said, "No, what about Sitan?" "He died."

Rockateller looked unenthused. "So what? Just replace him like always. Is there a problem?"

"There are some who do consider it a problem," Mr. Gray said reluctantly.

"Just give me the straight dope, that's what I like about you, Gray. You don't pull any punches."

Mr. Gray started to explain the situation. "The new king is apparently much worse than the last. His mental faculties are extremely degraded. I'm not sure giving him victory with the war reparations to increase his power is the best idea at the moment. Might I ask why you favor Sitan?"

"That's easy," Rocketellar smirked, "Mr. Max is getting too cocky. We don't like that, not one bit, so we're gonna teach him a lesson. Remind him who his bosses are."

Mr. Gray nodded slowly as he responded, "Look, I don't like that arrogant little dipshit any more than you do, but I'm telling you, if you see this new Sitan, you won't have to think twice about who to give the victory."

Rockateller looked out the window for a moment and stared thoughtfully into space. He turned back to his assistant plotter. "He's that bad, huh?"

"I can assure you, the man can barely talk. It's really quite absurd. He has his lucid moments, but they are few and far between. Apparently Mr. Wizard has his work cut out for him. I highly recommend favoring Max, or at the very least, leave things as they are and let the war come to a stalemate."

"No, we can't do that. That would interfere with other plans," Rockateller said brusquely.

"Other plans?" asked Mr. Gray with raised eyebrows. "I'll tell you when the time is right," assured his master.

"I assume you will have another round table with your partners?" Mr. Gray asked as he looked sharply at Rockateller.

Rockateller began, "Yes, I..." then hesitated, which was very rare for him. "No, actually. I'll break protocol on this one. We'll go ahead and pull Sitan's war funding. I know you have good judgment, Mr. Gray. I'll need you to draw up the peace agreement and the necessary propaganda with Mr. Bernays, of course."

"And what shall the reparations be for President Max?"

"As little as possible. Maybe a couple billion in cash and two percent of trade revenue from the Royals. No land, though. Save ourselves the headache of re-drawing the border, at least."

Mr. Gray smirked and said, "Consider it done."

Rockateller gave a smug grin and walked out briskly.

## Chapter 16

Divine School Official 9003 was staring blankly at the flashing screen in her modest living room. She had been for a couple of hours. There was nothing in particular she was looking for, just trying to pass the time. She missed her son. He was in the Divine Child Reclamation Center. She knew it was necessary in order to break him of his bad habits. After all, a child who asked too many intelligent questions was not good for society. You need to go along to get along, after all. Everything was going according to Divine Will. How could a person, especially a child, dare to challenge the Divine Will? Not only that, but his behavior was beginning to be a personal embarrassment to her. She was a Divine School Official. Any more incidents might lead to bigger problems for her at work.

“Energy prices going up due to unforeseen circumstances,” blared a monotonous voice from a soulless face on a blue screen. “According to a spokesman from Point of Light Energy Company,” the authoritative monotone continued. “In other news, High Priest Hellius will appear at the Peace Pyramid tomorrow to commemorate the fifth year of everlasting peace, which was reached after the Divine Will interceded on behalf of the people, and brought an end to the war with a great victory against the barbaric Democratic Free State. This has been a presentation of God Vision, your inspirational news source,” the blaring box said in conclusion.

9003 didn’t flinch at the news. It was all too common. There was always one reason or another that energy prices rose, no matter how much her wondrous nation produced. Her mind was wandering, only half paying attention to the infomercial now blaring from the screen.

“Feeling down?” asked the overzealous voice. “Uninspired?” it continued. “Get help now, from Spirit Pharmaceuticals” it pushed on. It had been a few months since 9003 had gone to a Spirit office seeking help with severe depression. The pills seemed to be helping, or so she thought, anyway.

“Don’t miss, coming up next,” prodded the idiot box, “Canon Dodgeball Live! Winner takes the grand prize, One Million Divine Dollars!”

An obnoxiously loud buzzing noise startled 9003 out of her thoughtless fog. She slowly staggered towards the intercom on the wall to see who was visiting so late.

“Hello, who is it?” she asked with a slight slur as she rubbed her olive colored face.

“It’s me,” said Divine Scribe 3332.

“What are you doing here so late?” she asked in a puzzled voice. It was after curfew, so this was a bit alarming to have a visitor.

“Can I explain up there?” he pleaded. She buzzed him in and a few moments later the middle-aged writer was at her doorstep.

She opened the squeaky front door, in desperate need of repair, and greeted her unexpected friend. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Nice to see you, too,” he said with irony. She looked him up and down, sighed, and let him in.

"Why are you stroking your beard? You always stroke your beard when something's wrong," she inquired as she crossed her arms and took a seat on the patchy sofa.

"You know me too well," he answered.

Before he could continue, she hit him with another question, "And why are you out this late? If you get caught, we'll both get it, ya know."

"I got a pass from the Temple Authorities."

"Must be important," she said with a yawn.

"I've heard some things going around about you, and I wanted to give you a fair warning," he stated nervously. She stared at him blankly. "You didn't come to Temple Service last week. On top of that, the thing with your son, ya know, people are starting to wonder if you might need some Divine Correction."

Her demeanor didn't change. She was a blank slate.

"What's wrong with you?" he pleaded in an angry tone. "You're not the same person. Everyone can see it. It's as if you've lost faith."

She squirmed uncomfortably before answering. "It's just sometimes," she whimpered as tears began to roll down her tired face, "I think that everything is so wrong. What are we doing here, ya know?"

3332 touched her gently on the shoulder and in a consoling manner responded, "Yes, I think we all feel that way sometimes, but you can't lose your faith, things will get better. You just have to trust in the Divine Will."

She turned away from him and was crying more intensely now. "What is good faith without good action?"

Not sure what she meant, he came back with a question. "What do you mean, good action?"

"I mean that no matter what we do, no matter how much faith we have or how obedient we are to the High Priest, things never seem to get better. There must be a better way."

Still a bit confused, the Divine Scribe responded, "Patience, you must have patience."

She turned back to him and lashed out, "Patience with what? The corruption in the system? The hypocrisy of the priesthood? The ripping apart of families? The lies?"

He held up a hand to attempt to quell the eruption he was witnessing. "Please, please, not so loud. They might be listening!" he pleaded in a nervous voice.

"Fine, let them listen! I'm tired of worrying about who's listening! If you're so worried about talking to me and them hearing it, then why are you here? Look, I appreciate your concern, but I just want to be left alone. Could you please go?"

## Chapter 17

Hellius rode in the back of a nondescript brown sedan with tinted windows. It was certainly not his customary mode of transportation, but this was not a common event he was going to attend. It was extremely rare for his top general to request a one-on-one meeting, and the High Priest could count on one hand the number of times he had been requested to go to a military man's private residence.

The sedan pulled up to the immense black iron gate which guarded General Israel Osama al-Isis' palatial estate. A guard at the gate recognized the car and allowed immediate entrance with a bow of reverence. The car continued to roll slowly up a cobblestone path which wound up a hill through lush gardens which gleamed every color one could imagine.

Parked in front of the general's enormous stone palace, the spiritual leader of the Divine Nation strode to the colossal front door and was greeted by one of the general's servants. The servant bowed obediently and showed the way to the atrium. Hellius noticed that for all the vibrance he observed in the general's gardens, he was completely lacking flavor in his interior decoration.

Entering the atrium, General Isis was slowly pacing back and forth puffing on his pipe. "Leave us," he commanded the servant, who bowed respectfully and departed.

"Love what you've done with the place," said Hellius.

The general didn't flinch. Puff, puff. "No time for jokes. Too much good news to talk about."

The robed leader raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Really? Do tell. I need some good news after my awful visit with Darius."

The general was not aware of the High Priest's meeting with the head of the energy company, but decided to let it pass for the moment. The general went on to explain the astounding news about the video feed from the other side of the planet. Hellius' face lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Have you eliminated the men who brought you the info?"

"Of course," replied the general, coldly.

Hellius gleamed and asked, "So we're the only ones with this information?"

"The only ones in our nation, but the feed is still being received by the Free State."

Schemes abounded in Hellius' mind. Oh, the power which could be attained with the technology! Oh, the divine weapons! "One day," Hellius said firmly as he looked off in the distance towards the surrounding hills, "I'll be giving orders to Darius."

Puff, puff. "Not just Darius," al-Isis confidently confirmed, "But the whole Rockateller clan. And who knows, if we play our cards right, the whole planet will be brought under our command."

"All we have to do is find the right people to reverse engineer what we find in the feed," proclaimed Hellius.

"It won't be that easy. The first thing we need to do is analyze all the data coming in, which is no small task. The video is streaming nonstop. Finding useful bits of intel will be difficult and time consuming," explained the pragmatic general in a stoic manner.

Hellius couldn't contain his eager joy. "Still," he replied, "The sky is the limit. Do you have some people in mind that you can trust?"

The general stroked his mustache thoughtfully and answered, "There are a couple people who I don't distrust." "However," he continued, "I think it would be wise to use as many low-level technicians and scientists as possible, people who don't have much ambition. If a clever, shifty type gets a hold on the technology before we do, it could be trouble."

Hellius gave a care-free yet sinister laugh. "General Isis, my good man, you worry too much. No one from the lower ranks is that clever, to be sure."

The general didn't appreciate the High Priest's lackadaisical attitude, but in order to keep things civil he refrained from making a comment to the spiritual leader's face. After all, the general calculated, the High Priest wouldn't be involved in the day to day tasks of using the invaluable information. That would be left up to military expertise. The only reason he really needed Hellius at all was for funding and political support when the time was right.

"We're going to need a great deal of funding, which will need to be off the books," Israel al-Isis told Hellius.

"Don't you worry, I'll take care of the funding. You just get your research team together and leave the rest to me. I'll make the proper arrangements and contact you soon when I have the funding apparatus ready. In the meantime, I might as well tell you now, my meeting with Rockateller was less than enjoyable, to say the least. Prices are going up again, so if things get out of hand with the people, and the police can't handle the situation, I might need your boys to step in. On top of that, we'll have another war to fight soon."

"Against who?" the general demanded to know.

"Not sure yet, general. You'll be the first to know when I get the news. Until then, we need to focus on our new project. Agreed?"

## Chapter 18

Wells Russell, Head Clone Scientist 0200, and the newly cloned/crowned King Sitan looked about as awkward and out of left field as a small group could look. Russell had the appeal of a bookworm and was walking with a bit of a care free stride and admiring the inside of Royal Palace 1. It was his first time in the most important palace, as he had only visited the lesser castles and abodes of the Royal Family. 0200 was a dazzling physical specimen but looked unenthused at her surroundings while keeping a watchful eye on the new king, as he was prone to wandering off and getting lost. As for Sitan himself, his mouth was gaping open and his dumbfounded eyes were running circles around the palace when he said, "Wow, everything's so shiny! And listen to that echo! Can I stay here?"

"You are staying here," assured the sizzling scientist who was happy to be rid of the burden. Just a few more moments of torture, and he would be the queen's problem. Well, the queen and the palace guard, anyway,... and a handful of psychologists. And God knows who else, but not Miss 0200.

Queen Sitan herself, meanwhile, was sunning herself at the Royal Spa which was covered with a vaulted glass ceiling to allow for year-round sunbathing. She was quite youthful, with delicate features and silky skin. However, due to her extreme narcissism, what should have been a fine looking face had an unappealing contortion to it.

It was in a position of laying half asleep in a golden sunchair in which Queen Sitan was found by the new king and his delivery crew. The three towered over her for a moment before she took notice and said with an annoyed tone, "You're in my sun." Bowing reverently, Wells Russell took it upon himself to make the introductions.

"My queen, it is with mixed emotions that I..."

"Who are you?" she cut him off, head still turned away.

"I beg your pardon, your majesty. I am Mr. Wells Russell, head of the Royal Science Department. The young lady here with me is Head Clone Scientist 0200, and this is your new husband."

This caught the lazy lounger's attention and she forced herself to sit up a bit, take off her sunglasses, and observe the motley crew. She looked the new king up and down for a moment. She then turned to Mr. Russell and asked, "He's new? What happened to the old one?"

"As I was about to say, your highness, your old husband suffered a heart attack and died. This is the new King of the Royal Region."

The queen glanced back at her new mate, then back at the science man. "Is he more slow-witted than the last one?"

Unable to look the queen in the eye, Mr. Russell nervously kept his hands in his pockets and stared at the ground while answering, "Well, that might be a better question for 0200, here. She has brought him up."

Sitan then spoke up and said, "If I were slow-witted, could I do this?" He then flung his body into some contorted mess and made faux-martial arts noises as if he were some wannabe samurai child. The queen angrily shook her head.

"Oh, I see now. He's not slow-witted, he's got no wits at all! Can you damn science people get your act together?"

0200 came to the poor clone's defense by saying, "Please, your majesty, don't be so harsh. He has his lucid moments, really he does. Once in a while he can be quite intelligent and charming, actually."

"What does slow-witted mean?" the puzzled king asked 0200.

Mr. Russell tried to comfort the fuming queen. "Now don't you worry, Your Majesty. You have an army of experts at your disposal twenty-four hours a day. I'm sure that, in time, you can learn to love him for what he is."

Incredulous, the queen replied, "I didn't love the last one, and I certainly don't plan on loving this monkey!"

King Sitan again queried, "If I'm slow-witted, can I have sex with you?"

"We're never having sex, you imbecile!" the queen huffed.

"On the bright side," Russell continued to reassure the queen, "He's got some speeches to film, so he won't be your problem for a couple of days, at least. He'll be the problem of the Royal Network."

The dainty queen folded her arms as a pouting child would and held a horrible grimace on her face. Taking a deep breath, Wells feigned a positive face as best he could and said, "Well, speaking of the Royal Network, I suppose we should be on our way. They have their work cut out for them, that's for sure. We'll leave you get back to your relaxation, Your Highness." The queen flung her hand in disgust in order to give them leave and they went on their way.

A while later the small group was walking through a busy television studio. Everyone from directors to janitors stopped to gawk as the king walked past. Sitan kept up a permanent grin of dubious comfort on his face as they proceeded quickly to their meeting with Director 2324.

Just before reaching the director's office, Sitan spotted a black cat on one of the sets, ran over, flung himself on the floor, and put himself face to face with the feline. "What a cute little kitty witty, yes you are! I want him! Can I have him?"

The production crew involved on the set gave amused and confused looks at the spectacle. Quickly running over to diffuse the situation, 0200 gently grabbed Sitan by the shoulder and, looking around the room uncomfortably and with a nervous laugh said, "Come on, Your Highness, leave the kitty alone."

Sitan rose and shouted in her face, "But I must have this cat! Mine mine mine! Lucky black cats are the key to victory, I say!"

Russell pleaded with the onlookers, "Whoever owns the cat, I'm sorry, but His Royal Highness is in great need of it at the moment and we will be commandeering the feline."

An angry set designer came over and yelled, "Oh, for God's sake, take the damn thing! Just have him back in an hour so we can finish this shoot."

"No! Mine forever!" objected Sitan.

Wells looked the designer in the eye and commanded, "The king shall have the cat. Get another for your bloody shoot!"

Dejected, the set designer walked away. Sitan smirked, grabbed the poor kitty, and walked off in a condescending manner.

It was thus an entourage of four who appeared in Director 2324's office. They walked in and found the director puffing a cigarette and staring at a bottle of whisky on

the table. Alarmed, the director looked up to find his visitors. Wells gave a disapproving look at the showbiz man and scolded him.

"Really, it's the middle of the day!" Recognizing the king, 2324 rose, bowed his head, and said, "Oh, Your Highness, what a pleasure!" Then turning his attention to Wells, "And who are you?"

"Mister Wizard didn't contact you?" Wells asked, somewhat surprised.

"Can't say that he did, I'm quite sure I'd remember that," assured the tipsy director.

Wells sighed and asked, "So you don't know the news?" There was a blank stare on the director's rosy face. "Sitan died. This is the new one. I'm sure Mr. Wizard will be contacting you shortly to make production arrangements."

Puzzled, 2324 inquired, "What happened to the other director?"

Rolling his eyes in disgust, Wells explained, "You know the rules. Once a king dies, the director is allowed to retire. That's the reward for putting up with all the royal bullshit."

Shocked, 2324 asked, "Are you sure you should talk like that in front of the king? He can hear, right?"

"He's basically a low grade moron, so no, I don't have to be so careful with my words," Wells explained as he eyed the cat with disgusted amusement.

"Why did Wizard pick me?" 2324 asked, obviously not happy with his new assignment.

"I haven't got the foggiest idea, but my best guess is that since you're such a boozy fellow, you might handle an imbecile with more ease. Or maybe he just hates you. That's not really my area of knowledge."

Sitan was now himself purring and closely hugging the cat which joined in unison.

2324, now becoming a bit flustered at such an unfortunate change of events, asked "What's with the cat, anyway?"

Wells shrugged, "Well, I'd best be going. You all have a lot of work to do."

"You mean a lot of miracles," 2324 angrily spewed under his breath.

Surprised, 0200 pleaded, "You're not leaving me here, are you? Why? I've got to get back to the lab!"

Mr. Russell smugly answered, "I think it is necessary that you help out the production crew for a while. You know the new king better than anyone, so I have a feeling they're going to need you. Don't worry, the lab will be well taken care of by your excellent staff, I'm sure. If you need me, you know how to find me, but it must be an absolute emergency. Got it?"

## Chapter 19

Royal Patrol Officer 6060 was dozing in and out of sleep in the early evening on his tacky sofa in his sparsely decorated apartment. The television was blaring the Royal Network loud enough for the neighbors to hear, but they dare not complain. He was an officer of man's law. He could do what he wanted without repercussions, within certain limits, anyway. He was in a semi-dream state from the medicine he had taken when he got home from work. Psychologists at the Royal Police Headquarters had given him the drug Fixall in order to help with his depression. He didn't think he was depressed, but the experts said he was, so who was he to argue?

His dream was flashes of his day. Writing tickets for an illegal vegetable garden. Why did that old lady argue with him? He was just doing his job. Caught a guy speed walking. Fined him. Running late for work? Sorry guy, not my problem.

"Royal Energy Corporation says prices set to rise, due to unforeseen circumstances," blared the glowing box.

Everything was fuzzy. Shook down some petty coffee dealers downtown. Let them off with a warning since they gave me a tip. Gotta make ends meet, right?

"The Royal Army has been winning great victories against our arch enemies from the Democratic Free State," the voice rambled on. "And now, stay tuned for King Sitan's weekly address. And don't forget, after our Immortal Leader's words of wisdom, keep it right here for everyone's favorite game show, Vaccine Survivor!"

6060 jolted a bit, looked around the empty room, and sagged back down into his foggy comfort with his eyes planted on the glaring box. "My favorite game show," he thought. "Whoever can take the most vaccines in one day without dying wins the money! I should go on that show, I'm a tough guy," he thought with a smug smile on his face.

Then there appeared the Immortal King Sitan on screen, in all his glory. 6060 grinned ear to ear as he observed his king. He noticed something different. The king was holding a black cat. Sitan was seated on his golden throne surrounded by priceless works of art, statues, gleaming diamonds, and ravishing red carpet. He was dressed a bit differently than normal, however. He was not in his royal robe. Instead, he was wearing an oversized rainbow colored cowboy hat, a purple cloak, tight and somewhat faded blue jeans, and a pink silk shirt.

"Good evening, good people of the Royal Region," began the speech as Sitan struggled to focus his eyes anywhere near the camera. "I want to thank you all for your hard work and devotion in the war effort," he continued in a monotonous tone as he squinted at the teleprompter with a confused look on his face. "It is with great pleasure, that I am introducing a new friend to you all tonight. I hold here," he smiled with pleasure as he held up the cat as if it were a trophy, "The nation's new friend, Captain Wiggles!"

6060 chuckled at the king and thought to himself, "Must be hitting the sauce a bit too much lately, I guess. Well, he is the king. I suppose he can do what he wants."

After kissing Captain Wiggles on the nose, the Immortal King Sitan continued. "I am also announcing tonight, in order to provide greater happiness for the people, I

decree that each person shall be given a black cat, so everyone can experience the same joy that Captain Wiggles has brought me!"

Smiling in a daze at the king's show, 6060 thought it was a fantastic idea for everyone to have a cat. "King gets wiser every year," his soupy brain thought. Perhaps he would prefer a gray cat, but no matter, it was a generous and brilliant idea to lift people's spirits.

Sitan was now shaking his left leg wildly on the throne and peering around the room nervously. "Thank you for your attention. That's all for this week. Goodnight, and God save the king!" he sputtered out quickly.

"Yes, God save the king!" repeated 6060 in his mind.

"Feeling blue?" blurted the noisemaker. "Fixall could make it right for you! From your friends at Royal Corp!"

Yes, everything was just fine for 6060, as he sank deep back into his chemical slumber.

Later that night, the bulky cop was awakened by a slamming door. He turned to peek at the entrance to his dingy little castle. There he found his twenty-year-old stunning daughter. She had her hands on her slim hips and a contorted face. This didn't look good, he thought.

"Hi, dad. I see you're doing the usual, huh?"

He smiled woozily at her, "Yeah, you know me, I like my routine. It's good to see you. What brings you by?"

"You don't remember? You were supposed to meet me for dinner, like two hours ago!" she howled.

He tried to remember, couldn't, and tried to think how to save face.

"Don't bother making up an excuse," she said, dejectedly. "You need to get off those drugs," she scolded as she approached him slowly.

"Can't do that," he blurted, "The department psychologist has the last word. If I don't take those pills, I lose my job, simple as that."

"Maybe you should get a different job," she sobbed.

She had mixed emotions about her father. She loved him and remembered when he was a better person, not so long ago, before they put him on the so-called medication. She also needed him more than ever after the death of her mother. He needed her more than ever, too, which is why she wouldn't give up on him. It had been less than two years since her mom died of a 'mysterious illness' that the experts just couldn't figure out at the time, still hadn't figured it out, so far as she knew. It was strange timing, dying so quickly after taking a vaccine, but University Student 6060, as the young daughter of the cop was known, couldn't prove it was the cause of her mother's death. And now her dad was hooked on pills from the same expert apparatus.

"I've been a cop my whole life. What would I do? Besides, another ten years or so and I can retire."

"You won't last that long on those pills," she objected strongly. "Besides, how can you live with yourself, doing what you do?" she continued.

He gave her a dirty look, "What in the king's name do you mean by that?"

"You enforce all the stupid laws, speeding, illegal parking, tax evictions, coffee drinking, all victimless crimes."

"What I do is keep order, period!" he shouted. He was growing angry. Who was she to criticize? He rubbed his face. He always did this when he was uncomfortable. "Maybe you should go," he said curtly.

"Maybe I should," she whimpered.

## Chapter 20

"I understand you're upset," the nervous social engineer said as he fiddled with his goatee.

"You have a fantastic gift for understatement, Mr. Bernays," Barack Bush said as he glared at his subordinate.

Sigmund Bernays was the top speech writer at InfoCore, the propaganda hub for the three nations and owned by World Corp. His job was intricately important in social management, as he had to write the speeches for all three world leaders. He had to inspire, strike fear, spread joy, and manipulate the emotions of the masses flawlessly, which usually was simple enough for a man with his training and pedigree. The circus act that had just occurred with Sitan, though, was causing his boss to currently be in his office at InfoCore, breathing fire down his neck.

"A cat!" Bush yelled as he pounded his fist on Bernays' desk. "I didn't know we paid you to operate a circus, Mr. Bernays!"

Sigmund took a large gulp of air and decided to weather the storm before he spoke.

"Was the cat your idea? I mean, really, an immortal leader of a nation acting like a bloody child! And free cats for everyone! How the hell are we gonna finance that? Maybe we can start with your paycheck, Mr. Bernays! How does that sound?"

The master psychologist tapped his fingers nervously on his desk while he responded, "A thousand apologies, sir! But really, please understand, I just write the script."

"I know you write the damn scripts, that's why I'm here!" Bush bellowed with a flush red face.

"It's really the responsibility of Mr. Wizard and the director to make sure the script is followed. I'm not trying to pass the buck, but really, they're the ones responsible!" he desperately pleaded. "Here is the actual script, if you'd care to take a look," he continued as he held up a crisp white piece of propaganda.

The angry oligarch swiped it from Sigmund's tense fingers. He scanned over it quickly, mumbling a bit to himself as he read, "admire courage, stay strong, tough times ahead, evil Democratic Free State." He looked away from the page and gave his subordinate a wry look. "Nothing about cats."

"No, like I said, nothing about cats."

Bush looked around the room in a contemplative manner, then asked, "So what now? How do we fix this?"

Cringing due to the extremely awkward circumstances, Mr. Bernays replied, "Well, sir. You are a master of the universe, so I'm sure you will think of something absolutely genius to remedy this most unfortunate situation."

Bush smirked and bobbed his head a little bit. "Master of the universe, I like the sound of that."

"You're not a lord for nothing," Bernays continued to pet his boss' ego.

"You're right, Sigmund, there are lots of reasons I'm a lord," he gave a megalomaniacal compliment to himself as psychopaths in power love to do.

A loud beep pierced the ego appreciation and startled the smug lord. Bernays picked up his phone, "Now is the worst time ever," Bernays politely informed the caller.

"You're really gonna love this, sir. We have the newest approval ratings for King Sitan," his assistant said on the other end.

"If that's sarcasm, you're fired," Bernays warned his easily replaceable task man.

"His approval rating went up ten percent! There's a huge surge of love out there and renewed appreciation for the king! Also, preliminary numbers indicate that a large majority of people approve of the cat idea."

Bernays sat silent with his mouth open for a bit out of mild shock.

"Sir?" said the bringer of good news.

"Yes, that's wonderful, thank you. And you're not fired," Bernays gleefully said as he hung up the phone.

Beaming, the whiskered psychologist proudly informed his prominent guest, "Sitan's approval ratings went up! Can you believe that?"

Bush slapped his hand on the desk and gave a laugh of relief.

"Bernays, like I said, you're a damn genius! Nice work!" Sigmund just grinned and nodded in approval, not wanting to point out the obvious hypocrisy. "Now all we gotta do is figure out how to deliver all those damn black cats," Bush explained.

Bernays once again didn't comment. He was just happy that the cat problem wasn't his anymore.

## Chapter 21

“Do you know why you’re here?” asked Divine Reclamation Officer 6446 from her comfy office chair as she glared at her young troublemaker.

Divine Child 9003 answered defiantly, “I’m here so you can make yourself feel powerful.”

“Wrong answer!” she angrily huffed. “You’re here to see if you’ve been cured of your Interrogative Disorder.

The lanky thirteen year old boy stared at her with contempt. The sour old lady began the questioning of the rebellious young lad.

“Who is High Priest Hellius?”

The boy peered upwards as if contemplating, then with a finger raised, answered, “He’s some weird guy they show on TV a lot who has lots of people murdered.” He finished this with a wide grin of mischief.

“Wrong answer!” the red faced agent of the state screamed. She stared at him for a moment. “We can’t even continue; you’ve already failed. Why can’t you just give the right answers? Your mother would be very unhappy with you right now. And to think she works in the schooling department! If you give the right answers, you can go home to your mother soon.”

“I only get to spend one weekend a month with her anyway! All my time is spent listening to crazy crackpots like you all day in school,” he swung his voice in revolt.

“Ok, that’s enough!” she yelled as her face turned a unique shade of pink. She hit a button on her desk phone, “Guards, come take him back to sleeping quarters, and increase his meds 500mg.” Two black clad guards came in and whisked the young rebel off to his next dose of mental melting meds, a little white pill called FixIt. The pill, of course, was made by that beacon of freedom known as Divine Pharma Corporation, which was owned by God’s Bank, naturally.

## Chapter 22

Staring out the window of her black stretch limo as she neared her destination, Queen Sitan took a deep breath as she practiced her act in her mind. She was thinking about her ludicrous so-called husband and his embarrassing show with that damned cat. He was going to single-handedly plunge the nation into chaos if that low grade moron was allowed to continue. However, she was shrewd enough to recognize the unprecedented opportunity the situation presented. Now it was time to act. The car rolled slowly up a muddy hill in the downpour as it neared the modern castle. She rolled the back window down so the security guard would recognize her and allow entrance. The thick iron gates parted and the limo slowly rolled to the giant arching wooden doorway at the front of the castle. The limo driver got out, covered, and escorted her to the entrance where they were greeted by her host, Zee Hissinger, the head of the International Intelligence Agency.

Mr. Hissinger gave a welcoming smile from his droopy old face and brought in the young lady to the warmth and comfort of his home.

“Come in, my dear, Mr. Gray is waiting for us in the study by the fire.”

She peered around at the creepy gothic décor of the drafty castle. She thought it was deplorable. The weird old man was the key to her mission, so she refrained from overt criticism as they walked down a long dark corridor.

They entered the study where Mr. Gray was sitting by the fire sipping some coffee. He greeted the queen cordially and she likewise.

“Please, have a seat,” Hissinger offered. She waited for Zee to sit down first so she could sit as far away as possible, as she found him and Mr. Gray both rather disgusting.

“Where shall we begin?” asked Mr. Gray to no one in particular.

Queen Sitan took the initiative and said, “How about we start with the blithering fool you guys have made king? I think that’s as good a place to start as any.”

Hissinger raised his hand authoritatively and cut her off. “Before you continue, my dear, our recent data on the public suggest that their affection has actually increased since the cat speech.”

The queen scoffed and replied, “Ha! That shouldn’t surprise me, damn fools. God, I hate that cat!”

Mr. Gray joined in by saying, “We’ll take care of public opinion. Don’t you worry. The more important issue is the information that must be used to our utmost advantage. Have a look at this, Queen Sitan.” He handed her a small electronic tablet with video clips of technology from the other side of the world. She gleamed and after a moment set the tablet aside.

“So what’s the next move?” she inquired enthusiastically.

Hissinger explained, “Mr. Gray and I will use some of our human and technical resources to aid in the development of superior technology for the Royal Region. In order to proceed, however, there are two vastly important things which must happen. Number one, we need more funding. And secondly, we need someone we can count on to organize the research facilities and personnel. That is where you come in, my dear. We can’t count on the current Sitan for anything more than outrageous and incompetent

behavior. Once proper funding has been secured, we can work with General Mars and yourself to make things happen.”

“Oh, gentlemen, I’m honored to take part in such a high-minded expedition, and don’t worry, funding certainly won’t be a problem,” the queen replied condescendingly. “However, I have a question of my own. What’s your play in all this?”

Hissinger gave a look of condemnation to the queen. Who was she to be asking such questions? Her job was to follow orders.

“That is on a need to know basis, and I can assure you, you haven’t got the need to know.”

“Very well. Might I ask who else has this information?”

Both men gave blank stares in return. Mr. Gray squirmed a bit uncomfortably and adjusted his spectacles. “If I may ask, Queen Sitan, how do you intend to obtain the necessary funding?”

The pompous lady replied, “That, gentlemen, is also on a need to know basis, and you both most definitely don’t need to know that. Agreed?”

The two shadow workers glanced at each other solemnly before they both grudgingly agreed. The young queen gave a pouty look at the ravenous older men and asked, “How much longer must I endure posing for pictures with this king buffoon? It’s really degrading.”

Hissinger gave a grinch-like twisted smirk and casually replied, “As long as it takes, my dear.” She decided to persist.

“Can we at least just put him on TV less? Maybe I’ll make more appearances or something. We can tell the chattle that he’s sick or something. They’ll believe anything that’s on that infernal blabberbox, you know?”

Mr. Gray rolled his eyes and jeered. “We might as well tell them that he’s dead, how about that? Would that make you happy?”

The narcissistic and spoiled little queen replied in all sincerity, “Fabulous idea! Now we’re on the same page!” Mr. Gray and Zee looked at each other and scoffed.

“There’s just one little problem with that. In the minds of the masses, he’s immortal! We can’t exactly just kill an immortal, now can we? Use your head,” said Mr. Gray from the International Freedom Foundation.

The two men persisted in a bit of demonic cackling at the queen’s naive nature. “That’s why we have the jobs that require thinking, my dear,” hissed Hissinger. The queen didn’t respond, but in her mind, she was confident in who would have the last laugh.

## Chapter 23

"You look ravishing as usual, my dear. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company today?" Barack Bush said to Queen Sitan as they casually strolled past a thick marble column in his polished mansion.

The Queen huffed and in a pouty tone explained, "It's the new Sitan. He's a damn fool!"

Bush sighed and said, "Yeah, tell me something I don't know. But his popularity has risen, amazingly enough, so it's not all bad, I suppose."

This upset the power hungry royal lady. She stopped and with both hands on her hips demanded to know, "And how long do you think that will last?"

Bush was impressed by her aggressive and defiant nature. "And what do you suppose should be done about it? I assume you requested to meet me already with something in mind."

The pompous woman turned away from him and folded her arms. "Well, I did have an idea that I thought might be beneficial to both of us."

This intrigued the male psychopath. He took a step closer to her and with a fox-like grin from ear to ear whispered in her ear, "And what does that pretty little head of yours have in mind, my dear?"

The queen turned slowly around and gave him a seductive look. "Transfer the power of the purse to me, out of his inept hands. I'll make sure to keep the region strong. And of course, you'd have my unending devotion," she said as she neared her sultry face towards his lips.

He stared into her eyes and asked in a soft, yet commanding tone, "And why would we want to keep Sitan strong? If he's weaker, he'll be easier to control."

She smirked and answered, "Not if the wrong people find out the truth about him. What might Hellius do if he knew the truth? Extreme measures must be taken to assure Sitan does not appear weak." She slowly ran a finger down his face as she continued, "Surely, a man of your stature and intelligence must see this clearly."

The oligarch still wasn't convinced. He sensed that this ambitious vixen had more up her sleeve, but decided to play along.

"Sitan has advisors to make sure he stays on the right path," he argued with a penetrating stare.

She looked him up and down as they stood face to face. She grinned and defended her position, "And who is to stop those advisors from having power designs of their own, should they realize the opportunity presented by such an inept pretender as the current so-called king?"

"And what would stop you from making your own design for power?" Bush asked.

"He has a vast multitude of advisors, where as I am only one," the sly seductress said emphatically.

Bush pushed further, "There's something you're not telling me. What design have you? You do trust me, no doubt. Out with it."

The queen blushed and finally gave in. "You're quite intuitive. Let's just say that I've got access to some very sensitive 'otherworldly' information, if you catch my drift."

"Involving what, exactly?"

"Technology that will change the world. If we work together, my lord, imagine the global power we could attain in the future! Don't you get tired of answering to Mason Black? Why shouldn't you be number one, darling?" she prodded.

Barack was stunned. How did she have access? Where did she get the info? Should he report this to the cabal? In his mind, in the end his ego won out, and the queen's ambition was too great a temptation to pass up.

"You answer directly to me," he whispered.

"Always," she said softly as she kissed him lustfully.

## Chapter 24

General Mars and Queen Sitan were quite the display in physical contrast as they sipped their tea in the vast royal court gardens. The old, gray, plump general was bitter and salty company. The war which had just been lost to the Democratic Free State had taken a lot out of the ancient battle strategist, and he was feeling as old as he looked. Queen Sitan, on the other hand, was youthful and had boundless energy, fueled greatly by her power ambitions and megalomania.

Also on display, much to the chagrin of the pretentious queen, was King Sitan himself. He was there out of necessity, despite the queen's personal wishes. He wasn't taking part in tea with his cohorts, however. He was merrily frolicking about in the well-manicured flower beds, lush greenery, and birds of infinite color.

The crusty old man sipped his tea gingerly and asked dryly, "So what's the deal? I haven't had tea with a queen in years, so I'm suspicious that there's something afoot. Drop it on me, ok?"

The queen was pleased with his eagerness to get down to business. She didn't want to be there anymore than he did. As she watched her supposed husband with a disdainful eye, she said, "General, I appreciate your candor. Your intuition is correct. There is something of vital importance that we must discuss."

General Mars held up a wrinkly hand and interrupted, "I haven't had much vitality the past few years, so if this isn't involving my retirement plan, the answer is probably no."

The queen wrinkled her button nose and looked at the aged war veteran with skepticism. "Please hear me out, general. I can assure you it will be of great interest to you."

He frowned and looked off in the distance at the childish psycho they called king. He looked back at his youthful companion and said, "All right, make it snappy. I've got a golf game coming up soon, and I hate to be late."

She was amused with the old man's practicality and bluntness. With a wry smile, she went on to explain the operation that she, Zee Hissinger, Mr. Gray, and Lord Bush were developing. The plan to unite the world under one rulership when the proper time came, including over the wall.

"Bullshit," scoffed the general. "And what about bonehead over there rolling around in rose petals? He's going to rule the world? What have you been smoking?"

The queen gave a sour look to the sour general, "That's where I come in. I'll be the power behind the throne, so to speak. I'll be coordinating with the relevant people and organizations, but I need your help. We need the Royal Military to do the bulk of technological development, and when the time is right, to utilize it to achieve our ends."

General Mars scratched his modest patch of silvery hair and thought for a moment. It was a most intriguing proposition, but he was damn old and running on fumes, and he knew it. But maybe this spirited young lass and a new daring project such as this was just what he needed to fuel some regenerative fire.

Looking at his new catalyst across the diamond studded lounge table, Mars spoke deeply, "You've got footage from the other side, have you?"

Having the feeling that Mars was in the process of changing his tune and on the verge of joining her clan, she grinned widely and replied, "You want to see?"

The general pursed his lips and said, "Yeah, I'll have a look. Shouldn't kill me, I guess."

The queen showed him video of a black flying machine much to the old man's delight. His eyes lit up as he stared at the wonders being shown him. She turned off the display and he peered away in the direction of the so-called king, who was climbing a tree across the way. Shaking his head disapprovingly at the less than royal behavior he just witnessed, General Mars looked back to the queen.

"So now I answer to you, and not him, is that how this works?"

The queen's eyes lit up. Everything was going perfectly. "Yes, that's right. And just to make things perfectly legal, Mr. Gray suggested that the king sign over all executive powers to me, which I just happen to have the documents for right here."

"What are you waiting for?" urged General Mars, "Get that goon over here now!"

The pampered woman called over to her TV-only husband, "Sitan, darling! Can you come here? I have a surprise for you!"

The king, wearing a yellow and red ensemble, ran over quickly while yelling, "I love surprises! Oh boy oh boy oh boy!"

"He looks like a damn hot dog, the fool!" the crusty general criticized.

The queen gave Sitan a smug look and said, "I need you to sign something, dear."

The middle-aged man pouted and objected, "What? That's a bad surprise, and I don't like bad surprises!"

His wife rolled her eyes and said, "If you just sign right here, you can have some ice cream!"

The king puffed out his cheeks and pushed for more, "Ice cream and pizza! You promise? And I want some for Captain Wiggles, too!"

"Ok, ok, ice cream and pizza, whatever! Just sign the damn thing!" Sitan happily relented and signed an obnoxious slop of illegible goop onto the carefully prepared legal document.

"That's a good boy, now go on and play," the queen urged her hapless counterpart.

"Promise me one thing," the general said in a serious tone as he stood up to leave for his golf game. "That freak has no part in this. If I find out that he so much as even chooses the toilet paper for this operation, I'll resign, no questions asked. Clear?"

"Crystal clear. I look forward to working with you General Mars."

## Chapter 25

One year later

A lot had happened over the past year. Vintage took up residence with his newfound friends Ray and Sophia. They taught him the fundamentals of Natural Law. They also began instructing him on the trivium method for finding truth and avoiding fallacies. Vintage struggled at times, due to the constant indoctrination he had been submerged in his entire life, but he was making great progress, nevertheless.

Vintage was also earning a good living by doing comedy shows with Jovius. They went on the road sometimes but also posted some recordings on computer networks. These shows became quite popular and Vintage was content with this aspect of his life.

He was also quite content with his relationship with Luz. She was a magical woman who poured sunshine into his life whenever they met, which was not as often as he would have liked. He came to Mari's place to visit when he could and she would take a trip to Ray and Sophia's place on occasion.

Despite all of the positive things happening in his life, Vintage, the man formerly known as Writer 2001, couldn't help but feel incomplete. He still had no recollection of any personal memories. He could remember certain things, such as how society operated on his side of the planet, or particular places and events, or the fact that he had been a writer for a newspaper, but he still didn't have any personal memories of human contacts. This disturbed him greatly. Did he have a family on the other side? Were they missing him? Why had he ended up on this side of the planet anyway? He also felt a great deal of sadness for the people on the other side, not just for his nation, but for all people living under mind control of the tyrants, no matter the region. He had hopes that his memory would come back to him at some point, but now, in the meantime, he was creating a great life for himself in this tranquil setting.

On the other side, things were heating up. Nobody in the control structure knew it, but there was a technology race taking off. Or did anyone know?

There was an apparatus set up to reverse engineer anything and everything from the fantastic information being received from the video feed. It was wilder than anyone could possibly imagine. Invisible elastic body armor, flying vehicles that transform themselves, objects that change shape on command or even disappear, wireless electricity, and countless other wonders.

In the Democratic Free State, there was rejoicing due to the imminent war victory over the Royal Region. Tyran Max was taking advantage of the situation in order to funnel money into his secret research project. If things went well, he would never have to win another election. With the right technology at his fingertips, he could make everyone bend to his will, including his corporate masters.

In the Royal Region, Sitan still held high popularity, but with great losses in the war effort, some people were starting to have doubts. Queen Sitan was busy getting her research project underway as she had grandiose visions of turning the power structure in her favor.

In the Divine Nation, things were a bit more complicated. There was domestic unrest over rising prices, unemployment, and living conditions were getting worse, despite record profits for the Point Of Light Energy Corporation. High Priest Hellius was busy diverting as many resources as possible to his secret research enterprise. He had received extra funding from God's Bank through the Rothsmans and Rockatellers in order to prepare for the coming war which he had been told to prepare for. That war couldn't come soon enough because he was also having a difficult time keeping the outraged masses in check. He had stepped up surveillance, imprisonment, and beheadings, but these heavy handed methods had failed to produce any results. He also was having more public festivals and games to appease the hordes, but to no avail. Something more drastic was necessary.

"You've been a busy man, Mr. Gray. We commend you for a job well done," Galvin Creedy told his guest as he admired the city perched from a rooftop nestled high in the hills.

"Thank you sir. Cheers," the calculating and spectacled middle man responded as he held up his martini glass. The two methodical psychopaths lightly clinked glasses and took a sip of their cocktails.

"What name have you bestowed on our little enterprise, Mr. Gray? I feel you should have the honors," Creedy said as he happily slapped his comrade on the back.

Mr. Gray looked at his superior in a puzzled manner. It was the only look into the other side of the world that existed and he had helped create an operation that was going to steal their technology bit by bit. To Mr. Gray's line of thinking, an organization as secret as the one they had set up should remain nameless.

"I didn't give it a name. I thought it might be better to leave it without one," Gray explained.

Creedy pondered this for a brief second before he replied, "Well, it's got to have a name. What are we going to refer to it as when we're in communication, especially remotely? We can't just go around saying 'that thing' or 'the whatcha-mawho-ha, now can we'?"

Mr. Gray scratched his balding head and said, "Well, I suppose you're right."

"As usual," Creedy confirmed.

"As usual," Mr. Gray confirmed with a fake smile. "How about we call it Operation Fuzzy Cherry?" suggested Mr. Gray.

"Damnit, man! You can't hold your liquor, apparently. What the hell kind of name is that?" Creedy disapproved.

"Just the first thing that popped into my head," Gray explained, turning a bit red.

"The word operation doesn't need to be in the name. I mean, honestly, why do secret operations always have the word 'operation' in them? It's a dead giveaway!" Creedy said incredulously.

"Good point, sir," Gray heartily brown nosed. "How about Money?" Gray asked.

"No, that might get confusing. We talk about money a lot. Something more inconspicuous.

"Maybe black cat?" asked Gray.

"Damnit! First Sitan, and now you! What's this damn infatuation with cats all of a sudden?" Creedy yelled.

Frustrated, Gray answered, "I don't know, sir, it must be the martini talking. Is it really that important?"

Huffing, Creedy finally gave in. "Well, it's not too terrible. Cats are quiet, crafty, black is my favorite color. What the hell! Black cat it is!"

"Perhaps we should move onto more important matters, sir?"

"Absolutely," Creedy said, as he gulped the last of his martini. "But first, we need more drinks."

A couple hours later and the two men were sitting on the balcony. The glasses were stacking up on the table next to them. A red-faced and squinty-eyed Mr. Gray was comfortably slouched in his lounge chair and Creedy was in much the same condition.

"Do you know what I'd really like to know?" asked Mr. Gray with a bit of a slur.

Creedy, with permagrin plastered on his face, answered, "Whatever you want. I love you, man." Both men giggled like schoolgirls.

"What's gonna happen when we have the ability to get over there? Will it be done in secret, or will the nations be involved?"

Creedy exhaled deeply before he answered. This was not something to be discussed with a subordinate, but the alcohol was artificially lubricating the oligarch's trust. He leaned over near Mr. Gray's face and whispered, "This is between us, ok?"

"Of course," Mr. Gray whispered back.

"We're not sure," Creedy whispered.

Mr. Gray couldn't help but have a good belly laugh at this. Not sure? How could the masters of the universe not be sure? This was perfect, Gray thought.

"What do you mean?" pressed Gray.

"What I mean," Galvin Creedy continued, "Is it depends on the tech development. If the flying stuff works out first, and we have that option first, then we'll most likely go over in droves." "But," he continued with forefinger thoughtfully in the air, "If we can break through the wall first, then the best option would probably be to go in covertly, at least at first."

"That makes perfect sense," Mr. Gray petted his master's ego. "And will it be all nations going in separately, or will they be united under one government for easier control?"

Creedy shook his red face and sighed. "That's where we're undecided. There are some who think keeping three separate regions is still the best option, but others feel that a unified front would be easier to manage and more effective." "What do you think, Gray?"

The cold and calculating man knew the answer before the question was asked, but hesitated a moment to really sell that it was a difficult decision. Thoughtfully, as best he could with a buzz, anyway, Mr. Gray responded, "I'd have to say that keeping them separate would be the best option."

"And why do you say that?" Creedy pried.

"I guess what it boils down to, is you don't want too much power falling into the wrong hands. You need to keep the so-called leaders separated, at least on a superficial level, so that control can be assured from the top. If not, things could get dicey."

"That's exactly how I feel!" Creedy shouted. "But not everyone feels like that. Sometimes I feel like I should be running the show, ya know?"

"I'm sure things would run flawlessly if you were," Gray said as he tried to restrain his laughter.

"Damn it Gray, that's enough business talk! I need another drink! Where's that lousy servant?"

Mr. Gray had gathered enough information and congratulated himself in his mind for accomplishing his mission. He'd definitely drink to that.

## Chapter 26

At the pointy peak of the sky-scarring glass World Corp. Tower were three floors of blacked-out windows. Here is where Mason Black sat at the pinnacle of power. The stern power-broker was not having a good day. He didn't enjoy berating his subordinates, but it was necessary to keep them in line and keep the operation running smoothly.

Right now, though, Mason was staring at the wall-sized aquarium on the other side of his gargantuan office. Galvin Creedy was also staring at it, pretending to admire the colorful world before his eyes. In reality, however, Galvin wanted nothing more than to get this meeting over with. He had been called in unexpectedly, which couldn't be a good sign.

"May I ask," began Creedy.

"Don't talk yet," Black cut him off coldly.

Creedy swallowed his pride and sat back deeper into his chair. A brief moment which seemed like eternity passed and then Creedy's highest boss spoke again.

"Amazing, isn't it? Nature. The strong survive. The big fish eat the little fish. Everything functions in perfect order, isn't that right, Mr. Creedy?"

"I suppose so, sir," Creedy confirmed.

"However," Mason continued in a reflective voice as he turned his attention away from the aquarium and towards his employee, "Sometimes the little fish can be poisonous and end up killing the big fish, is that not true, also?"

Creedy turned to face Black. "I imagine that might be possible, sir."

"So, Mr. Creedy, it has come to my understanding that you feel things should be run a little differently than the current trajectory, is that correct?" he asked in an icy tone.

Galvin Creedy sat on the other side of Mr. Black's outrageously enormous black desk. He'd definitely seen better days. He was wondering how in the hell Mason Black knew so much about his personal conversations in his own home. Was Gray a rat, or did Black have him under surveillance? He hoped for the former. Gray would definitely be easier to deal with. He didn't flinch, however, as psychopaths rarely do, even amongst themselves.

"With all due respect, sir, please don't take anything I said out of context," Creedy defended himself as he was locked into Black's ferocious eyes.

Black exploded, "Out of context! Please enlighten me, Creedy, as to what part of, and I quote, 'sometimes I feel like I should be running the show', is out of fucking context!" Steam was rising from Black's well-coiffed head and beams were blazing from his eyes.

Creedy still didn't flinch, but a single drop of sweat came slowly inching down his face as he quickly tried to think of a suitable defense.

"I can assure you that you have my complete loyalty. Sometimes I get frustrated, but I would never disobey the consensus and jeopardize our objectives. You have my word."

Black shook his head in disbelief. "Stop your groveling, Creedy. It's shameful and pathetic. You're an important part of our operations, but don't you ever fucking forget that you're not irreplaceable. This is your first and final warning."

There was a moment of frozen stillness and Mason continued, “Oh, and another thing. The name of the operation, Black Cat? I should have you eliminated based on principle. That’s a terrible fucking name.”

Creedy didn’t flinch. All he could think was, “Well then, why don’t you name it yourself next time? And why don’t you meet with Gray yourself?” He knew, however, that he was responsible for meeting with the rank and file such as Mr. Gray. Mason Black didn’t trouble himself with such matters.

“I understand. Just one thing I’d like to know. Am I being watched, or is Gray a rat?”

Mr. Black snickered in disbelief. “I’ll tell you one thing, Creedy. You’ve got some industrial strength cojones asking me a question like that. I’ll tell you what, though. I’ll throw my little dog a bone. Before I was just watching you, but now I’ll be watching you like a fleet of hawks. Now get the fuck out of my face.”

Creedy did as he was told and exited the palatial office. On the inside, though, he was bubbling over with indignation. How dare he be treated in such a way, even if it was by his superior. Whispers of revenge began floating through his mind.

## Chapter 27

It was a time of great opportunity but also one of great risk for High Priest Hellius. Not only was he diverting funds from the very financiers he was attempting to overthrow via a technological coup, but more urgently he needed to regain control over his domestic population. None of the usual tactics were working and he needed to take more drastic measures. In order to do this, however, it was necessary to get approval.

With all this in mind, the lanky leader of the Divine Nation glided smoothly alongside his top general, Israel Osama al-Isis. "We shouldn't just be waltzing into God's Bank to meet like this. I don't like being so out in the open like this," Hellius complained. General Israel didn't share his conspirator's apprehension. If Troy Rothsman himself wanted the meeting at the bank's headquarters, then so be it.

"If that's how the boss wants it, who are we to complain?" the stoic general said as he puffed his pipe and they entered a glass elevator. One of the security guards with them pushed button 101.

Upon exiting the elevator they were greeted by attractive identical twins with matching smiles. "Welcome, right this way, gentlemen." Hellius motioned for the guards to stay put and the four walked off towards Rothsman's office.

One of the huge mahogany doors at the office entrance was open and Troy Rothsman was sitting with his feet propped up on a jumbo sized round table and he was staring up at the sky-lit vaulted roof. Seated next to him were Darius Rockateller from Point of Light Energy and Zee Hissinger from the International Intelligence Agency. They all stayed seated and showed zero respect for the new arrivals. Rothsman offered a seat and the puppets of fortune obediently sat without hesitation. The twins shut the door behind them on their way out.

"What can I do for you, Hellius?" Rothsman got straight to the point. He was a man of direct action who hated wasting time with pleasantries. He also, like most power hungry madmen, had a disdain for his underlings.

"As you know, sir, the domestic situation in the Divine Nation is quite grave at the moment. I've tried everything I know how," Hellius explained quickly.

Rothsman held up a hand to stop further comment. "So now you want me to do your job for you, is that it?" he arrogantly abused the so-called national leader in a nonchalant manner. He then turned his sharp-shaven face to his close associate Darius Rockateller and asked, "What do you think about that, Darius?"

The energy kingpin gave a look of indignation at the High Priest, cocked his head back, and said, "I think it's damn pathetic, that's what I think."

Rothsman then turned to Hissinger and asked for his thoughts on the matter. Hissinger's potato face muttered, "An absolute embarrassment, that's what I think."

Turning back to Hellius and the general, Rothsman continued, "Yes, I'd say that I'd have to agree with both of these gentlemen here. I agree one hundred percent." Rage was starting to become apparent in his voice.

Hellius tried to stay calm but couldn't help breathing a bit quickly and perspiring as if he were sprinting in the tropics. General al-Isis, however, puffed away on his pipe and kept a poker face intact.

Rothsman took a deep breath, took his feet off the table, and leaned forward. "You two are quite lucky, though, and I am quite generous. Do you want me to tell you why I'm so generous, oh great High Priest?" he mocked. They both reluctantly nodded approval. "You mean you don't know?" the bankster yelled ironically. They both shook their heads no, both considering that it would be better not to speak at the moment.

Rothsman started laughing to himself as he looked away from his puppets for a moment. "Ok, I'll tell you. As you two stooges might remember, a few months back you were informed that a new war was on the horizon. Well, the time is nearly upon us. In order to galvanize the troops and bring the masses back under the yoke, and consequently, to save both your asses, it will be necessary to take a very particular course of action. Do either of you have any idea what that action might be? I suspect you do, as you were the ones who requested this meeting."

Both men sat speechless for a moment. Realizing that they were actually expected to respond, the stoic general took the initiative and said, "We need an attack to galvanize support and unite the people."

Rothsman slapped the table with piercing enthusiasm. "I'll be damned, you're not as dumb as you look, General! That's right! Mr. Hissinger, will you lay out the necessary details for our actors-in-chief, please?"

The career intel chief spoke in a wickedly low tone and explained, "There will be an attack on one of the principal worship centers soon. It will be blamed on terrorists from the Democratic Free State. This will have two positive effects. Number one, it will unite them behind their dear leader and end this domestic turmoil. Number two, it will enrage the populace and expedite the war effort against the DFS. We will be sending some Agents 0187 to you. It will be your job, General, to work with them and make sure the operation goes smoothly. As for you, Hellius, as always, your job is to smile for the cameras and act your part."

Rothsman erupted, "There, think you guys can handle that? Just play your roles and we'll take care of the rest!" He turned to the oilman seated next to him, "Think they can handle that, Darius?"

Darius shook his head and laughed. "God, I hope so! I wouldn't want to have to change pawns anytime soon. That can get real messy."

"So, that's it! Unless there's anything else, you guys can get out of my sight. Go back to your harems, smoke your pipe, whatever you need to do. Just don't fuck this up!" Rothsman concluded the meeting.

Blood was boiling inside the two Divine Puppets as they exited the sky-lit room. Neither of them said a thing on their way to the elevator. They didn't need to. They were both thinking the same thing. This was their final humiliation. In the future, sweet revenge would pierce their bosses' hearts.

## Chapter 28

It had been a couple of months since computer programmer 0777 was contacted by a mysterious character from the Freedom Intelligence Agency. There was a top secret project which needed her expertise. If she agreed to take part, she would receive double her salary and be temporarily relieved from her normal work duties. If she refused, she would be put to death. Naturally, she chose the former.

Her mind started drifting. Where was this information coming from? Why this galactic-sized surge in innovation all of a sudden? And where was all the money coming from to finance it all? She'd never seen things happen so fast, especially on a government project. Perhaps the spoils of war were greater than she imagined, but that seemed to be too simple an explanation. All a great curiosity, but she knew that asking questions could only lead to trouble.

She glanced at her watch. Time to go! She wanted to beat the rush home in order to avoid the victory parade mayhem. President Max had just signed a cease-fire agreement with the Royal Region. Victory had finally been achieved and peace would reign, or so 0777 hoped.

On top of all that, she was overjoyed because her only son was coming home for three days. All children were given passes from the state to stay with their parents for three days if they wished in order to celebrate the great war victory.

Her boy was growing up so fast. It wasn't fair. Her husband had been whisked away for some secret mission.

An hour later and she arrived back to her what was fast becoming an inadequate dwelling in her mind. She had a high enough salary now, so why not move someplace a little less depressing? The doorman greeted her with his typical overenthusiastic tone.

"Good afternoon, fine day, isn't it?"

She really wasn't in the mood. She was tired from working such long hours and now she wanted to clean the place up a little before her son arrived.

"I suppose," she answered as she avoided eye contact.

"A great victory! Are you going to watch the festivities?" he eagerly prodded.

"Of course! I wouldn't be much of a patriot if I didn't, right?" she answered wryly as she decided to take the stairs to avoid further contact with the plump happy bot in his swivel chair.

An hour later and she heard the pitter-patter of young feet running towards the door and then a spirited rap at the door. She rushed over to let in her pride and joy. "Mom!" Student 2001 yelled excitedly. She embraced him and kissed him tenderly on the cheek.

He ran in and flopped down on the charmingly dilapidated sofa.

"Can you believe it, mom? A whole three days together! I wish we'd win wars more often, don't you?" he cheered with bright eyes. She wanted nothing more than to spend more time with her son, but having more war was definitely not something on her list of desires.

"I would love so much to spend more time with you, dear, but I could do without the war. What do you want to do this weekend?"

Without hesitating, he shouted, "The first thing is to watch the parade on tv!" Anytime a spectacle involving President Max himself was on display, it was nearly irresistible to watch, especially for young bouncing balls of energy like Student 2001. Anyone who wanted to see a bazaar of color and eccentricity just had to watch the show, especially for a victory party. Tyran Max didn't spare a dime when it came to showboating and self-aggrandizing.

However, watching such a pompous display was the last thing 0777 wanted to do. She couldn't say no to her son, though, especially when he was this determined. She unenthusiastically agreed to switch on the glowing box to watch the show. It was perfect timing, too, as it was just beginning. "Glad I beat traffic," she thought to herself.

Countless hordes of mindless power-worshippers lined the streets and screamed with delight. The camera was showing an eye in the sky view to show how abundant the joy and praise were in the happy kingdom of freedom. It suddenly cut to a shot of Tyran himself, dressed in a gaudy-colored leisure suit and a bright pink fedora and riding high on a very special float. The float was a giant likeness of King Sitan lying flat, slain with a giant sword protruding from his scientifically designed chest. Yes, in the world of Democratic Free State propaganda, Tyran Max had smitten the immortal King Sitan.

"A fantastic display of megalomania," she thought to herself as she watched her son mesmerized by the electro-hypnotist. Tyran was waving incessantly to the crowd and running around the float like a wild animal, grinning from ear to ear like a maniac. The little boy giggled with delight at the display.

"The president is a funny guy, huh? You like him?" she cringed as she asked her son.

He turned towards her and replied thoughtfully, "Yeah, he's funny, but he's not a good president."

Happy to hear this, she asked why.

"Because he won't let me live with you," he said bluntly.

It almost brought her to tears, but she maintained her composure. "And because he makes you work too much," he added as he got comfortable on her shoulder.

She smiled and let her son melt into her for a moment. "There's still hope for the world," she thought.

## Chapter 29

President Max was whisked away in a bulletproof stretch limo after he finished his public shenanigans. Now that the masses had been appeased he had more pressing issues to attend to. He pulled out a mini glass jar and took a pinky-full of ‘not sugar or salt’ to clean out his sinuses.

“Great show sir, if you don’t mind me saying,” the driver casually mentioned to his executive passenger. The driver couldn’t help but smirk a tad at the absurd getup his passenger was wearing.

“Hey, what was that?” Tyran asked in a demanding tone.

“I’m sorry, sir,” came the confused response.

“I see you, I see you. You think something’s funny,” Tyran ranted.

“Not at all sir,” the driver answered, trying to stay calm and neutral.

“I could have you killed, ya know. I could do that,” Tyran said with narrow eyes, a wrinkled nose, and a finger pointed at his driver. No response was forthcoming.

The limo pulled into the Freedom Defense Authority headquarters. The dull guards at the iron gates gave a salute as the luxury tank posing as a car rolled by slowly. Tyran hopped out and scampered quickly through the maze of corridors until he came to his co-conspirator’s office. He burst in and startled General Tool who was sitting, nodding off in his swivel chair.

Noticing a half-eaten bucket of fried chicken and a jumbo slurpee in front of the plump general on the desk, Tyran quipped, “Good thing I showed up when I did, or you might have drowned, ya damn pig.”

General Tool was accustomed to insults from his boss and this one bounced off his thick skin like all the others.

“Please, have a seat, sir. We’ve got some things to work out.” After a pause, a look of curiosity overtook his wide face and he asked, “Aren’t you going to give a victory speech? You just ran away after the parade?”

Tyran huffed and with a jitter replied, “Already taped it a few days ago. I can be a little jumpy sometimes, so I stutter, ya know? The boys down at the TV station think it’s best to tape most speeches so I can’t screw up. Whatever works, right?”

General Tool raised his bushy eyebrows and continued with the business at hand. “Anyway, we’ve got some issues. The bottom line is, we need more funding for our little enterprise. I need more personnel and the infrastructure is more costly than I first anticipated. In order to maintain secrecy, we’re building new labs underground, as you insisted, sir. This is also making things more pricey than necessary.”

Tyran looked a bit confused. “Hold on now, just level with me. Are you blaming me for your inadequacies, general? I could kill you, ya know,” he muttered in a quick huff. General Tool was also accustomed to the occasional death threat from his boss, but again shook it off as just another empty drug-fueled delusion.

The gruff military man spoke very loud and deliberate, “WE... NEED... MORE... MONEY.”

The president forced out through his dry mouth, “Yeah, money, no problem.”

The general narrowed his eyes and asked with a sigh, “Could you please enlighten me as to how you’ll come up with the funds, and when?”

The power drunk president smacked his hands together and proclaimed excitedly, "I'll sell my limo! How about that?"

The giant on the other side of the desk winced.

"I'm just kiddin, ya big lug! Here's what I'll do. I'll start by raising taxes, then I'll cut benefits for the poor, and maybe slice a little off the school pie. Hell, if that's not enough, I'll set up a foundation for the poor. I'll go on TV and plead with the fools that it's for a good cause, help your fellow man, save the starving children, blah blah blah. Works like a charm, don't you worry. I'll just use all the donations for a more righteous cause, which would be ours, of course, wink wink. How about that, General?"

One thing the giant general had in common with Tyran was a complete lack of conscience, so he didn't bat an eyelash at the funding scheme.

"Ok, that works for me, and in the meantime, we'll do the best with what we have."

Tyran was rocking back and forth in his suave leather chair and nodding impatiently with pursed lips. "Yeah, all right, you take care of all that technical mumbo jumbo. Just get me some damn cool weapons and toys so we can have our way in this damn world, ok?"

"Spoken like a truly great man," the general thought to himself. "So when do you think you'll have more funds available?"

"I'll get on it ASAP, so probably in a few weeks. Right now, though, I've got more pressing issues. You got anything to drink?"

"What kind of drink, exactly?" the general asked. He thought it was alcohol, but he tested the waters just for fun.

"Whiskey, rum, anything to take the edge off, ya know?"

The general hit a button on his desk and the fake plants behind him swiveled 180 degrees to display a stocked liquor cabinet.

"A little scotch, sir?"

"Nope, not for me. I'll take a lot of scotch!" the president answered as the general reached for an intricate crystal bottle of brown liquid. Tyran snatched it from his underling's hand and took a huge gulp straight from the bottle.

"Ahh, that hit the spot! Well, I'd better let you get back to work. Mind if I take this bottle with me, General?" he said as he walked off.

## Chapter 30

"Creedy, you look like a wreck. What's wrong?" John Rockateller asked in mocking concern. "And why didn't you want to meet at the bank like we usually do? Why did you insist on such remoteness?"

Galvin Creedy had begged for their normal business meeting to take place at Rockateller's ranch on Crystal Lake. Ever since his meeting with Mason Black, he'd become frightfully paranoid. He needed to do something to try and not only ease his tension, but also to give himself a chance at redemption.

He asked Rockateller, "Is your place secure? I mean, as far as you know, you're not under surveillance?"

Rockateller looked at his business partner with amused confusion as well as a pinch of contempt. "No, nobody's watching me. What the hell kind of question is that?"

Galvin Creedy went on to explain to the Libery Corp. oligarch exactly what had transpired in his meetings with Mr. Gray and Mason Black, every last painstaking detail. Rockateller, not normally given over easily to apprehension, looked a tad distressed by this news. If the Black Family was watching Creedy, could they possibly have everyone else under surveillance? He pondered this notion for a second and then brushed it off.

"Wow, that's something else, Creedy, but I'm sure I'm not under any surveillance. So what's your next move? You obviously have some design in mind, otherwise you wouldn't just blurt out all you just told me."

Creedy was pacing back and forth near the fireplace staring up at the gothic vaulted ceiling. He then turned towards John and asked, "You lean more towards a unified front when we take over the other side, don't you?"

Rockateller sighed and gave a nod of reluctant agreement, then replied, "What's your aim here, Creedy. Out with it, already."

Creedy looked into Rockateller's dark eyes and said, "I think we should hedge our bets."

"We?" Rockateller quickly retorted.

Creedy just stared at him waiting for more.

With a large huff, Rockateller continued, "You want to back someone for real? Are you out of your mind?"

Creedy had been thinking about it since his meeting with Mason Black. The way he saw it, it was his only chance at salvation. "Think about it, John. If we do nothing, and there is division in the ranks over how to proceed militarily on the other side of that wall, things could get messy. You know that. Everyone knows that. But if we take the initiative and back one of the horses early, and give it every advantage possible, monetarily and technologically, then we can't lose. Not only that, but we'll be in the driver's seat. You have to see the logic in this, John. But I can't do it alone. I'm being watched, so my hands are tied, but as far as we know you still have free reign."

John Rockateller couldn't help but see the cold business logic of his partner of many years in the Liberty Business. It was true. Who knew how far things could deteriorate if, at the final hour, there was dissension in the ranks of the power elite. Why not hedge their bets? On the other hand, if he was caught engaged in such

subterfuge, he, and possibly his entire family, could meet their end prematurely. And could he trust Creedy after all? Can you trust a man who is admittedly under surveillance?

Rockateller tugged at his mustache. "Hypothetically speaking, if we were to back someone, who would you choose?"

Creedy thought for a moment while he leaned on a shiny marble column. "I think Hellius is the most stable of the three. Tyran is a mess because of his drug problem and Sitan, well, I don't think I need to explain what's wrong with Sitan. You saw that damn cat act."

"I see your point," Rockateller began, "But remember, we don't want a 'leader of the people' to be too intelligent, either. Hellius might be more difficult to control, especially with new toys in hand."

Creedy conceded that point, but retorted, "When push comes to shove, though, I don't want some bumbling fool involved in crucial moments. There's too much of a chance for Sitan or Max to make things FUBAR in a hurry. We just need the right control parameters in place, and Hellius will be a potent ally."

Rockateller conceded, reluctantly, and then raised another obstacle to overcome.

"We deal mostly with the Democratic Free State. If we suddenly start moving large amounts of credit to Hellius, it'll raise a red flag."

The two men sat silent for a moment. "You could talk to your brother, Darius, at Point of Light Energy, to join us." Rockateller instantly rejected the idea.

"No, he hates Hellius. He'd never go for it."

"I'm sure once you explain to him why you're doing such a thing, he could see the logic and stand tall with his brother." Creedy pushed, now getting excited that this could actually happen.

Rockateller shook his head, "And if he refuses?"

"He wouldn't rat out his own brother, would he?" Creedy inquired in a devilish tone.

"I like to think not," Rockateller admitted, "But there's only one way to find out."

"So it's decided, then," Creedy expressed with relief.

Rockateller cringed and said, "Damn you, Creedy. If this backfires..."

Creedy cut him off, "If this backfires, we won't be the only ones in Hell."

## Chapter 31

It was a gorgeous sunny day with a crisp desert breeze just like any other in the Divine Nation. Despite all the unrest that had occurred recently, people still basically went about their normal daily activities with the mundane comfort that routines usually bring.

One of these activities was to attend afternoon prayer service at a worship center, which could be found on almost any block as they were ubiquitous due to the mandatory state-imposed religion. By far the most popular of worship destinations was one of the oldest and also one of the most important in the Divine Book. Its name was Trisoluna. It was hundreds of years old and had some of the most intricate art and architecture on the planet. It was a pyramid carved out of stone with the apex of the pyramid made of brilliant sparkling crystals. It was truly a wonder to behold and it was held sacred by all in the Divine Nation.

It was on this dull and typical day in the capitol city of the Divine Nation in a vast desert oasis that changed the world dramatically in a matter of slow-motion seconds, as mundane days tend to do every once in a great while.

It was one of those days that everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing when that dramatic flux happened. Divine School Official 9003 was walking back to work after she had just finished her prayers at the Trisoluna Temple, as she did every day. She had left the worship center earlier than normal because she had some work to catch up on and didn't want to get stuck working late. Divine Scribe 3332 was in his office working on an article for the next day's paper. His office building, home of the state-run periodical Divine Daily News, was only blocks away from the great icon that day.

High Priest Hellius was busy all that morning and afternoon rehearsing and recording his future speeches regarding the unspeakable tragedy which was about to take place. This was done, as was the usual case, within the confines of God Vision headquarters, a subsidiary of World Vision Network (which also owned Freedom TV and The Royal Network, coincidentally). As for General Israel Osama al-Isis, he was feverishly working with operatives from various agencies to make sure the day went smoothly. He couldn't afford any screw-ups, not after that brutal meeting with Darius Rockateller.

In the harsh mid-afternoon sun the streets near Trisoluna were bustling with people rushing to and fro and others wandering around lackadaisically. Lots of street vendors were out as always hustling their wares on the passersby. Children were laughing sweet laughs and parents were struggling to make ends meet. Inside the temple there was an above average crowd, nearing one thousand. All were breathtakingly silent, in stark contrast to the hectic life of color buzzing outside. They were praying for anything and everything. They prayed for their souls, for their loved ones, for their nation, for cures and miracles, for gifts and for vengeance. Nothing has as wide a spectrum as that of things prayed for. The end result, however, was the same for all those devout souls that historic day.

Benevolent Police patrolled the area 24 hours a day and they were always there in greater numbers during peak hours, such as afternoon prayer sessions. On this dark day the patrol squads swarming around the area took little notice of the maintenance crews that had entered in the morning to do routine work on the holy site. Such a magnificent symbol of religious unity and pride must be kept to the highest standards, after all, and there were maintenance crews constantly going in and out on a weekly basis. The police didn't bat an eyelash as the crew that morning went in and secreted remote-controlled explosive devices at various strategic points within the temple, in order to maximize the destructive potential.

The epic blast could be heard for miles around and was an awesome display of raw power. The sound had a rippling echo throughout a vast part of the city and for a moment everything seemed to be in slow motion. Stones the size of small apartments rocketed through the air, an immense dust cloud mushroomed up and seemed as if it would reach the sky and go on for eternity, tiny fragments of glass splintered countless times and spiraled out of control.

After the blast, it was a surreal moan of fright, tears, blood, body parts, shopping bags, and countless bits of debris which just seconds earlier had served a purpose and now were destructive missiles. More than two thousand were killed in a flash that day, and thousands more were wounded. It was more than people and physical objects that were destroyed that day, however. All of the anger and discontent that existed over the growing police state, the corruption, the food shortages, the rising prices, and countless other atrocities dissipated in a flash. All of the mental and emotional energies of a repressed and desperate people were now being directed, with machine precision, towards a new and common enemy.

An otherworldly chill shivered 9003 to her core as the blast reverberated through her in slow motion. She froze for a moment in confusion and disbelief. She turned around and saw the dust cloud rising in the near distance. The horrific scene which clouded the horizon penetrated her like nothing ever had before. She didn't know what to do. The first conscious thought in her mind was her son. Surely, he was safe and secure in the Divine Reclamation Center. He had to be safe, right? Her only son couldn't be taken from her. Tears started streaming down her face. She turned away from the cloud and ran towards her school. She had to do a million things in the next minute and the children's safety was racing through her mind. She sprinted the remaining blocks and was huffing desperately for air upon her arrival at Divine School 20.

There was a disturbing stillness in the hallways of the drab brick and mortar institution. She thought, "Why was it so quiet?" Upon entering the office she found her co-workers glued to the TV in the corner. They were engrossed in the breaking news of the blast and searching for answers on the flashing screen. 9003 picked up a phone to call and see if her son was ok at the reclamation center, but before she could dial, one of her co-workers said, "Phones are jammed, you'll never get through."

"Well then, I'll have to go down there in person. I've got to know my son is ok," 9003 shrieked as the tears flowed unabated. Sirens could be heard whizzing by in a steady stream outside.

"You'll never get anywhere right now, nobody will. Traffic will be backed up for miles. You'd better sit tight," advised another tearful school official.

"Are all the children here ok?" 9003 asked in a shaky voice.

Another worker assured her that they were and that the medical staff was checking them out. Nobody was taking their eye off the vision machine, though. They needed info and updates. Above all, they needed someone to tell them what happened and that everything would be ok.

God Vision did just that. A hefty newscaster was reporting from the confines of the news studios downtown, dryly spewing information to the masses. Normally, the newscasters sat in front of a calming blue screen, but not today. Today the background was a polished crimson.

"Our initial reports state that a terrorist event has destroyed the Trisoluna Temple. We will get live footage in moments as police are rushing in to secure the area."

Twenty minutes later and the group of school officials were still glued to the TV set in disbelief. They didn't know what to feel at the moment. It was a rare mix of fear, anger, disbelief, sorrow, and vengeance. The newscaster spoke faux gospel truth again.

"We have received information from the Divine Intelligence Agency. They are stating that it is believed that terrorists from the Democratic Free State are responsible for the unspeakable attack on one of our holiest sites. We now have security video footage from the temple courtyard showing two suspicious characters carrying black backpacks and leaving them at the scene shortly before the blast. Initial facial recognition scans indicate that they are not members of the Divine Nation. Intelligence officials say there is a video they are investigating which could very well be the attackers making threats just days ago on a DFS computer network. If the video matches the faces from the security footage, it could be confirmed that the Democratic Free State was behind the attack."

Just like that, in the blink of an eye, the thoughts and emotions of millions were steered to the exact point the ruling oligarchy wished. One of the oligarchy's minions, High Priest Hellius, sat in the video production room during the attack and watched it with the keen eyes of a hawk. His general had done well. The wheels were smoothly in motion. Now it was his time to rouse his followers into a war machine once again. After watching the attack on a live feed, he scanned over his speech that had been carefully prepared for him by Sigmund Bernays and the Infocore staff.

"Oh, it's such ludicrous drivel. 'Terrorist this', 'freedom that', 'faith this', 'perseverance that'. I get so tired of making these damned speeches. Why can't I have a little fun like Sitan does when he's on camera?" Hellius complained to one of his makeup artists as he was having his face touched up.

The director of the upcoming address to the nation was within earshot and yelled, "Sitan makes that stuff up! You think Bernays really writes that monkey garbage? It's gonna bite him in the ass one day, too. Just you watch."

Hellius shrugged his broad shoulders and said, "Oh well, whatever."

"We're all set, you ready?" asked the director anxiously.

9003 and millions of other lost souls glued their eyes to millions of flashing screens as their dear leader, High Priest Hellius, addressed the nation about an hour after

the attack. Some of the common words that buzzed through the fear driven comments of the multitudes as they watched were ‘inspirational leader’, ‘freedom’, ‘faith’, ‘resolute’, ‘solidarity’, ‘terrorists’, and last, but not least, ‘revenge’.

Simultaneously, General Israel was busy coordinating with his war staff, making plans, delegating resources, receiving new funds from God’s Bank for the war effort, and doing it all with a satisfied look on his face.

The world was changing, everyone knew, but to what extent, was a mystery to all.

## Chapter 32

"Brother, it's always good to see you. What's the occasion?" inquired Darius Rockateller to his older brother, John.

John sat and puffed on a cigar as he lounged in his brother's vaulted atrium. "I'm not in trouble again, am I?" Darius joked.

The older oligarch cracked a smile. He was calm and cool as always, but he knew what he was about to propose was a game-changer. How would his little brother react? "Brother, we have like minds, don't we?" began the elder.

"Of course, John. We've had our differences over the years, but our ideals have always been on the same track," Darius answered as he lit up a fat stogie himself.

"I'm a bit concerned about the accomplishment of one of our ideals and the methods which might be used to bring them to fruition," John explained as he took a hefty puff.

Darius looked a little bewildered and asked, "What are you driving at?"

"As you know, there are different opinions about how to proceed to taking over the other side, once the proper technology has been developed," John stated bluntly.

Darius calmly responded, "Yes, that's true, John. You and I believe a unified front would be best, while there are others who prefer to keep the global order as it stands now."

John looked his brother in the eye and leaned closer to him, "And what do you think will happen when the technology is there and it's time to choose one path or the other? I think it could get very messy, if you know what I mean, especially if Mason Black and his family hold sway opposite our position. Have you thought about the consequences of that, brother?"

Darius shook his head slowly in affirmation and said, "Indeed I have, but forgive me, the purpose you're driving at with these statements still eludes me. Again, I ask, what are you driving at?"

John went on to explain the meeting he had had with Galvin Creedy a couple of weeks earlier and Darius listened to his respected banking kingpin brother with great interest and diligence. Darius gave his brother a sharp look in the eye as he slowly drew another puff.

"So you're looking to form an alliance, to hedge our bets, with Hellius. You know I hate Hellius."

John responded quickly, "As much as you hate Tyran Max?"

Darius grudgingly gave in on that point. Tyran Max was the worst of the sheeple shepherds as far as he was concerned, but that didn't necessarily make Hellius a trustworthy ally.

"And if our group has consensus when the time comes to unify, as we wish, what then?" Darius asked skeptically.

"Then we forget Hellius and stay unified with the group. But if there is dissension in the ranks, we play our trump card with Hellius and handle things our way."

"And if Black fights back? And what about the Rothsmans? What of them? You're talking about a major split here, brother. Have you thought this through?"

John replied confidently as he savored his cigar smoke, "Absolutely, but I need your help. We'll have the power at that point to have Hellius fully conquer the other regions and he will be under our direct command, along with Creedy. Hell, if the time comes, we can get rid of Creedy, too, if you want. I'm not particularly fond of him myself, but right now he's necessary. As for the Black Family and the Rothsmans, they can either fight us, join us, or we can have them eliminated. We'll be in control at that point. I need you, brother, in order to funnel more money for technology development to the Divine Nation. I can't do it alone because of my position at Liberty Bank. It would look too suspicious if I were sending enormous sums to Hellius. We have to do it the smart way, and your participation is key."

After staring down his brother for a moment and taking a deep breath in his billion dollar lungs, Darius said, "Ok, John. Let's do it. Set up a meeting with Creedy and we'll get things rolling."

John gave a devilish grin and said, "I knew you'd see it in the right way, Darius. We'll rule this world before all is said and done, rule it the way it should be ruled."

## Chapter 33

There was now a war raging on the border of the Democratic Free State and the Divine Nation. At this point, both had equal technology so most battles usually came to a draw, despite the victorious rhetoric of the false prophets on the television. The reality of wars in those days was that millions died while each side believed that they were winning.

It had come time for the Rockatellers to make their proposition to High Priest Hellius. John and Darius met Hellius and General Israel in one of the secure compounds the brothers maintained underground. Any chance of the three being seen together had to be avoided as it might raise suspicion. When Darius had contacted the High Priest the day before, it caught him off guard because they had met so recently. He had a strange feeling about it, but had no choice but to honor his boss' commands.

A special edition jeep with jumbo sized tires and seating for eight pulled up to the residence of the High Priest to bring him and the general to the appointed meeting place. The driver didn't speak to them and they weren't much in the mood for conversation either. They both had the feeling that their jobs or lives could be at stake. After riding through the desert for about an hour, the sleek off-road vehicle slammed its brakes and kicked up a cloud of dust in the clear night sky. The driver didn't say anything and the divine leaders weren't sure what to do.

After a moment, Hellius asked, annoyed, "What are we supposed to do, just wait here?"

The general lit his pipe and responded, "No, I'm getting out."

Hellius scoffed, "And go where, we're in the middle of nowhere."

Not taking orders on this occasion, the businesslike general swiftly stepped out of the jeep. After a moment of hesitation, the somewhat confused divine leader did the same. The jeep sped off into the moonlight.

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" cried Hellius.

Suddenly, two shadowy figures appeared on the horizon. They marched quickly towards the waiting leaders.

"Great, we've walked right into a trap. They're going to assassinate us," Hellius said in a half-joking manner.

"They wouldn't do that, at least not here," the stoic general maintained. The shadowy figures emerged and motioned for them to follow.

Within a couple of minutes, they came upon a cactus, or at least what appeared to be a cactus. It was soon revealed to be a false plant which housed a control panel. The security guard pressed one of the buttons on the cactus and a voice came through. It was Darius.

"Have our guests arrived?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Yes, sir," replied the guard.

"Scan them and let them pass," came the order from the oligarch.

The guard gave a no-nonsense look to Hellius and said, "Scan your tongue here," as he pointed to a sensor in the fake cactus.

The high priest's face contorted involuntarily due to the bizarre nature of the security proceedings. He approached the prickly green man-made cactus and stuck out his tongue. The cactus beeped approval. The guard motioned for the general to do the same. He slowly exhaled smoke as the machine did its work. After the scan, the cactus slid slowly away to reveal a steep underground staircase. The guards stood expressionless and motionless. Hellius looked at his partner in crime and shrugged. They both went down the spiraling staircase of which the end could not be seen as it was dimly lit. As they progressed, light finally began to emerge.

At the end of the stony staircase was a large rectangular room where Darius and John Rockateller were casually awaiting their arrival. Behind the two sharp-dressed oligarchs was an enormous, empty steel wall.

John forced a broad smile and greeted his two employees, "Welcome to the underground. Shall we?" as he motioned a welcoming hand towards the steel wall. "Darius, you do the honors, please." His younger brother had his tongue scanned by the steel wall and it slowly rolled open to reveal an unbelievable underground palace. It made the High Priest's mansion look like a simple hut by comparison. Everything was sleek, modern, intricately ornamented, and lavishly furnished. Hellius was visually stunned at the absurdity of the whole thing. Even General al-Isis, normally stoic and tough to crack any expression, had his jaw drop open.

"Please, come in and have a seat," Darius offered. "You must be wondering why we brought you down here, and you're probably even more perplexed as to why we took such extreme security precautions."

Hellius took a seat on a priceless ornamental sofa and the general took a spot in a golden hand-made chair which looked ancient but was in exemplary condition.

"It was a bit out of the ordinary, to be honest, sir," Hellius admitted. "However, it's always a pleasure to meet with such distinguished gentlemen."

The brothers took their seats on a flamboyant looking piece of furniture opposite the divine rulers.

"As you might have guessed, what we need to do is of the utmost importance and requires the greatest secrecy imaginable," Darius explained as he calmly held a sadistic gaze at his two subordinates.

"Oh, cut to the chase, Darius. Why do you have to put on so much bravado all the time?" John snarled. "I'll tell them and spare them the theatrics. Basically guys, we brought you here to murder you," he explained casually with a psychotic's calm.

Hellius and his top general looked at each other quite uncomfortably for a moment and just as Hellius was about to speak, John cut him off.

"Just kidding, suckers!" he exploded into laughter as did Darius. "Man, you should have seen the look on your faces! Ah, hell, maybe later we'll watch again on the security footage. That was too much!" he boasted. "Look! Even the butler is laughing at you!" John said as he pointed to one of his servants in the far corner of the room.

Hellius and General Israel forced a nervous and stuffy laugh and froze in their seats, unsure how to respond. What would you do if you were with two of the wealthiest people on earth in their secret underground lair and they joked about killing you? You laugh and freeze, and that's what they did.

"You guys want a drink? How about some 30 year scotch? Coffee? Anything?" Darius offered, intentionally trying to be overly gracious. Both politely refused. John motioned for the butler to leave them and the four were alone.

John and Darius looked at each other excitedly. Leaning back in his priceless furniture, John said, "You go ahead and explain everything, Darius. After all, they're your boys from your region."

The younger financial tyrant went on to explain the whole situation, the secret video from the other side of the world, the clandestine development of technology by the oligarchy, and the end goal of ultimately taking over the resources of the other side of the world. He went on to explain how there were some 'differences of opinion' regarding how to proceed once the proper level of techno-weaponry had been reached. All the while, Hellius and the general did their best to keep straight faces and not allow their little plot of power moves to be made evident. If that cat got out of the bag, then they really might get murdered in this underground palace. They didn't even look at each other, both just attempting to keep icy demeanors as they listened intently.

When the smooth businessman had finished his detailed spiel, the stone-faced general wasted no time in responding to the earth-shattering information.

"That's all very fascinating, gentlemen." "What, may I ask," he continued as he took a hasty puff from his pipe, "does this have to do with the high priest and myself?"

John and Darius glanced at each other before the elder spoke with a hopeful voice, "I'm glad you asked. What we are going to do is take matters into our own hands, in a manner of speaking. We want to unite this side of the world under one so-called leader, which would be you, Hellius. We feel that this will be a more efficient manner to conduct the war across the wall when the time is right."

The general put a thoughtful finger to his chin and asked, "So you're going to rig the game, in our favor?"

"I suppose that's one way to put it," John conceded.

Hellius maneuvered anxiously in his seat.

"And other members of your group, they know nothing of this?"

Darius gave a scornful look at the leader of the divine world, "I thought that was made plain already, but yes, that is correct."

Puff puff, the general raised his prominent eyebrows and said, "That's quite the ambitious plan." The Rockatellers chuckled and John agreed.

"To say the least! You have the gift of understating things, General. Now, to be clear on things on an operational level, we would arrange for a generous sum to be put in your hands for the development of advanced technologies, especially weaponry. We would be counting on you to maintain the highest degree of secrecy so you obviously need to be very selective when it comes to personnel."

The divine leaders sat patiently listening and tried to not drool on themselves from the inner elation they felt.

"In addition," John continued, "We could get all past data and research already conducted by our original group to your organization so that you would have the best opportunity to start out on an even playing field."

Hellius looked at the ambitious men with bottomless pockets and inquired, "So, I'm curious, what would become of Sitan and Max?"

Darius was perturbed by a question which, to him, the answer was glaringly obvious. He tilted his head a bit and explained brusquely, "They would be removed from power, of course. An entirely new world government would be formed, under your supposed leadership, which would set the stage for a unified front of further conquest on the other side of the wall." Darius had a smug look on his face and jokingly asked his lapdogs, "You two need some time to think it over?" His brother John rolled his eyes and sank deeper into the priceless décor.

Hellius and his top general shared a triumphant look at each other, then turning back to his boss, the high priest gave his reply.

"We would be honored to take part in such a bold enterprise."

"Whew!" exclaimed Darius with a huge expulsion of air, "I'm glad you guys accepted. If you had said no, we would've had to kill you!" The brothers bellowed hearty laughs. Hellius and Israel Osama al-Isis both forced as pleasant a grimace as possible.

Later, in the wee hours of a crisp desert morning, the divine leaders left the subterranean luxury fortress of the Rockatellers in complete silence. A private off-road vehicle was waiting to take them back to the capitol. As they climbed aboard, Hellius instructed, "Not a word until we get back to the capitol, and in a secure room. We have much to discuss." The general nodded coldly and the two were whisked away through the desert darkness.

The sun was on the cusp of rising as the weary pair returned to the capital city.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver, robotically.

"To my humble residence," snickered Hellius.

Moments later and they were having some coffee in the high priest's private conference room. The sun was rising outside, but the tireless plotters sat in darkened corners, for security purposes, of course.

"So how do we play this, general? Tell me what you have in mind," Hellius requested.

"Nothing too complicated. This is a perfect setup. We'll keep our personal research departments separate from the ones we set up with Rockateller money. Two branches of the same tree, working towards the same goal, but completely unaware of each other. We'll be able to pick and choose the best from both worlds, so to speak. Not only that, but we'll be able to know what our competition is doing at all times," boasted the icy military man.

Hellius narrowed his eyes and tapped his fingers methodically on the finely polished table, "How do you figure we can keep track of their developments?"

"Isn't it obvious?" the general spoke with derision, "They have their own R&D group with their corporate partners, but they're using us as a power play option to, well, have a not-so-subtle coup within their ranks. The thing is, they're feeding us information from their other group. We'll have the edge on them the whole time."

Hellius beamed pleasure from his olive-colored face and spoke with conviction, "Yes, that's right. I didn't even think about that. As for their corporate partners, do you have any guesses as to who they're backstabbing?"

The general took a long, slow puff from his pipe and pondered that interesting question. “If this is as big as I think it is, it probably involves the top players across the board,” the general said.

Hellius raised his big eyebrows and his long face stretched even farther, saying, “I imagine the Rothsmans are involved, and more than likely the Bush clan. Yes, General, you’re right. This is earth-shaking, and we’re at the epicenter. Things will never be the same. Do you think this goes all the way up to the Mason Black family?”

The general, without hesitation, confirmed this suspicion, saying plainly, “I would be very surprised if it didn’t. There’s no way the Black family wouldn’t be involved in something this big. This goes all the way to the top, which means we have to be extremely cautious. And don’t forget, we have the war with the DFS. Hopefully the financial interests of the powers that be will keep their interest in financing this war, which will make our job of hiding the money trail much easier.”

Hellius smiled broadly and praised his sharp-thinking partner.

“General Israel, I’m happy to be on your side. We’re gonna shock the world, from the top down.”

## Chapter 34

"I can't believe you're flying with him, especially to the moon. You're a brave man, Vintage, braver than I," Jovius quipped. Vintage had learned by now to take most things that his stage partner said with a titanic grain of salt. He just shook his head in disbelief.

"When did you get your space flight license, just last week?" Jovius prodded Tai, begging for a reaction.

"License, huh? Real funny," Tai said as he continued to load gear into his sleek space cargo vessel. It kind of looked like a metallic shark with finely defined features and a super glossy finish. Vintage's old habits caused a serious and thoughtless reaction.

"He doesn't have a license?"

Tai's face twisted with laughter, "Did you really just ask that? You should know by now that licensing doesn't exist here."

Slightly embarrassed, Vintage sheepishly looked away and loaded another container in the shark-like ship.

"Man, you're gonna love it up there!" Jovius cooed.

Wiping sweat off his brow, Vintage said, "Why is that? And you could make yourself useful and help us load this stuff, ya know."

Jovius frowned and grabbed a container.

"Pioneering man! That's why you'll love it! At least, that's what attracts me to it. Everyone up there has such an adventurous spirit, especially the ladies."

Tai stopped to take a breath and he pulled a little red pill from his pocket.

"Here, take that," he said to Vintage in an authoritative voice. Vintage popped it without question. Tai and Jovius both looked disappointed.

"Haven't you learned anything? You need to put what you've learned into practice," Jovius scolded his friend. Vintage started giggling.

"What's so damn funny?" Jovius asked.

Vintage opened wide and showed the little red pill sitting on his tongue, then he queried, "What's this pill for?"

"You are learning! Good question!" Jovius happily approved.

"It's so you don't get sick. This is your first time in space. You will need it, trust me," Tai urged. Vintage gulped down the pill and they finished loading the containers.

"Ok, ready to do this?" Tai asked eagerly.

Vintage nodded and they bid their goodbyes to Jovius. A two-week trip to the moon, Vintage couldn't believe his life sometimes.

They piled into the sharp silvery shark and took their seats side by side in a spacious cockpit. It was a two seater by design, used mostly for cargo transport. The craft gently rose straight into the air and Tai looked over at his flight partner. He looked a little nervous so Tai decided to try and cut the tension.

"Ok, so I'm gonna give you a quick lesson on the rules of spaceflight. Are you ready?"

Vintage looked back at him with a look that said everything, something to the effect of "why didn't you tell me this before takeoff?"

"I'll take that look as a yes. Rule number one, that giant blue button marked 'life pod' in front of you needs to be lit up. Go ahead and press it."

"What's the blue button do?"

"It activates your invisible life pod, or bubble might be more accurate. It protects you from the elements of space and gives you life support."

"Got it," Vintage said as he pressed the button and Tai did the same.

"Ok, rule number two, don't touch anything else."

Vintage put his hands up in the air and said, "Trust me, I don't even want to think about touching any controls."

"Great. And rule number three, and this is the final and most important rule, all passengers have to ride upside-down once we get into zero G space."

"What?" Vintage cried. "How long is the trip?"

"Just a couple of days. You're comfortable standing on your head, right?" Tai said with a serious face.

"What?" Vintage cried again.

Tai decided to have mercy. "Just kidding. We'll be there in about an hour. We could get there a lot faster, but since it's your first time, I'll let you sit back and enjoy the ride. You don't even have to stand on your head, ok?"

Vintage laughed and relieved his nerves.

Tai stared straight ahead as they neared the upper limits of the atmosphere. "Ok, hang on tight, I'm about to give it some gas," he said as his hand hovered near a control board which looked like the innards of a pinball machine with all of its nobs, switches and such. In an instant, they zipped through the atmosphere and were cruising towards that gorgeous silvery heavenly body which had provided so much amazement and food for thought for countless human generations.

"I feel funny," Vintage complained.

"It'll pass, don't worry. If you hadn't taken that red pill you would be much worse off right now," Tai tried to assure him.

"I'll thank you later," Vintage said as he grabbed his stomach.

Vintage tried to take his mind off his stomach by admiring the three-hundred and sixty degree view offered by the clear circular cockpit. So vast and empty in one direction, then the approaching silver ball in another.

"Great view, huh?" Tai said whimsically. Vintage nodded. They both took time to thoughtfully admire the heavens for a while.

Vintage decided to ask a question which he was sure had an answer beyond his comprehension.

"So how is this thing propelled?"

Tai smirked. "You want a science lesson, huh? It uses what's called a Reverse Magnetic Polarity Drive, but I call it Romp for short. Basically it works by repelling magnetic forces against each other. To give a basic example of how it works, there is one magnetic field generator on the ship which shoots a controlled magnetic pulse towards the largest magnetic field in its vicinity, in our case right now, it's the Earth. The magnetic pulse is the same polarity from the Earth's magnetic field, so they repel each other, like if you have two small magnets and put north to north, for example."

They repel each other. I can increase or decrease the speed of the ship by increasing or decreasing the magnetic generator on board.”

“So we’re basically being pushed away from Earth right now, is that what you’re telling me?” Vintage asked with amazement.

“More or less, that’s basically what’s happening. However, we can also be pulled. If the computer on board detects a larger magnetic field nearer to us, then it’ll fire a magnetic pulse in the opposite polarity towards that object.”

“Opposites attract,” Vintage lit up.

“Exactly. This ship only has one generator and since magnetism only travels at the speed of light, then that’s our speed limit. I only use this for local travel, ya know, around the solar system. In order to achieve speeds faster than light, larger ships used for interstellar exploration have multiple magnetic generators which can fire simultaneously, which increases the speed exponentially,” Tai casually explained.

“Fascinating,” Vintage said. He then got a look of uncertainty.

“What is it?” Tai asked.

“Well, to create a magnetic field, you need electricity, right?”

“Right.”

“So where does the power come from?”

“Great question. This ship uses anti-matter power generation, but larger ships employ multiple power generation systems. Multiple options and backups can be a life saver out in interstellar space. The anti-matter reactions can also be used for propellant, but it’s only light-speed capable, so it’s reserved for emergencies and local trips.”

“Wow, so we could blow up at any moment!” Vintage gasped. “I suppose that’s always possible, but quite remote. Most teenagers know how to make anti-matter and use it safely. It’s child’s play.”

“Not where I come from,” Vintage sighed heavily.

“I know,” Tai said in an amused tone.

“So what’s the purpose of the moon colony, anyway?” Vintage asked.

“Well, it serves lots of purposes. Some people just want to live there. Others are there to work with the resources. It also serves as a spaceport. Everything is still being developed there, the first established living area was built there less than fifty years ago.”

“So I’m a pioneer, kind of,” Vintage said proudly.

“You showed up at a good time,” Tai agreed, “It’s an exciting time to be alive. Interstellar travel just began about twenty years ago.”

“And where I come from, people are murdering each other for paper,” Vintage said dejectedly.

“Perhaps one day you’ll be able to help change that sad state of affairs,” Tai encouraged him. Vintage took a deep breath.

“Ya know, all this space travel seems kind of risky to me.”

“Life is always risky, that’s part of the fun,” Tai said stoically as he adjusted some of the controls.

“Yeah, I know, but it got me thinking. Let’s say that there’s an accident or a crime is committed. How is any fair arbitration conducted and enforced?”

“Before I answer, tell me how it works where you come from,” Tai suggested.

"It's pretty simple, really. The government appoints judges and when arbitration is necessary between two parties or if a crime is committed, the government appoints lawyers to all the parties involved. There is a catch, though. If you're wealthy, you can afford a private lawyer, which usually guarantees victory."

"Wow, that sounds fair," Tai said ironically. "So the way it works on our side of the world," continued Tai, "is definitely a lot different. The individuals involved usually agree to find a suitable neutral person or group of people, ad-hoc, to judge the case. However, there also exist in some parts of the world, small fixed companies which offer arbitration services. They receive user ratings and reviews about fairness from most people who use their services. If any of them decide to do something underhanded, which is rare, they quickly go out of business based on bad feedback and publicity from their previous clients. It's not perfect, but since when are humans perfect? Besides, at least there isn't a monopoly like where you come from. That's just begging for corruption to take root."

"And indeed it has. Everyone knows how corrupt the system is," Vintage told his pilot.

"Then why do people put up with it?" Tai asked incredulously.

"I don't know, Tai, I don't know," Vintage answered as he fixed a whimsical gaze towards the approaching moon.

As they began the descent a clear picture began to emerge. It was a bizarre collage at first glance, but upon closer examination, could be made out to be well organized and purposeful. Tai could tell his travel companion was impressed.

"So what do you think?" Tai asked.

"Astounding. It looks like a little mushroom city, with a bunch of lily pads" Vintage answered.

"I've never really seen that perspective, but now that you mention it, they do look kind of like giant mushrooms."

"So what are they?" Vintage asked.

"Just buildings. Homes, research centers, places of business, shopping areas. They're staggered throughout the 'air' like that for ease of transport on foot. You can jump from one 'lily pad' to another quite easily due to the low gravity. But that's not the half of it. Wait until you see what's below ground."

They were landing on a giant 'lily pad' that floated about one hundred yards above the other structures. It was reserved for takeoffs and landings. Vintage looked down on everything with skepticism.

"How are we going to unload all the cargo from way up here?"

"We're not," Tai said directly as he shut down the engines. "Here on the moon, we use robots for menial tasks like that. Have you ever seen a robot before?"

Vintage huffed sarcastically, "No, I'd never even seen a flying machine until I came over that wall. You have robots here?"

"Yeah, are you familiar with what a robot is?"

"Kind of, there have been some fictional stories written about them, but they've never come to fruition in real life. We have computers, that's about as high as our electronic tech goes. I even read a book one time about something called artificial

intelligence. Can you imagine, a machine that can think? That author was too far out there for most people so he never became popular. Do you think it's possible?"

"It is definitely possible, but to the best of my knowledge, nobody on our side of the world has created such a thing yet. It seems that most people have the same idea, which I tend to agree with. Why would you want to create a machine that has superior intellect, but can't feel? It could be unimaginably dangerous. Perhaps someone will do it one day, just because they can, or it might be necessary when confronting an advanced race in the cosmos, but for the time being, no one has gone that far with robotics. Anyway, what are we waiting for? Let's give you the grand tour!"

They climbed out of the top hatch of the metallic shark and Tai went to retrieve a couple of pieces of cargo. He came back with two little backpacks with little rockets attached to them.

"Here, put this on," Tai instructed.

"What are these?"

"These are jet packs. We can use them to better direct ourselves out here in low G. Sometimes the jumps from place to place can be a bit daunting, too, especially for a first timer. If you don't feel comfortable floating on your own, you can use the jet packs for more control. We're going down to that next pad, about ten yards down. All we have to do to get down there is step off the ledge."

Vintage peered over the drop.

"Piece of cake, right?" Tai smirked. "Don't worry, a thirty foot drop is nothing in this environment. You'll be fine. If you feel uneasy when you're about to land, though, just tap the green button on the side of the jetpack. It'll give you a little boost to break your fall."

"You go first," Vintage urged.

"Suit yourself," and Tai stepped off the edge of the landing pad. He gracefully floated down to their destination and landed safely, making Vintage breathe a sigh of relief. He followed suit and landed safely, but not so gracefully. He flopped awkwardly to the floor.

"Not bad for a first fall," Tai quipped.

They walked across the floating platform and came upon rows of robots, of all various sizes, designs, and colors. Some were bipeds, others quadrupeds, and some looked like an octopus or a squid. Vintage was shocked.

"Why so many?"

"Different types for different tasks, and then, of course, the designer's personal taste for esthetics. Some of the work here is really dangerous so robots are used. Things like tunneling and ice digging."

"Ice digging?"

"Yeah, we need water, of course, and there's plenty of ice, it's just sometimes daunting to get to," Tai said as he activated one of the octopus looking machines. It sprang into action and purple lights started to flash all over its body. A screen on its head asked for a command. Tai input the instructions and it jetted effortlessly up to Tai's ship and started filling its sprawling mechanical arms with blinding speed and efficiency. They admired its work for a moment before Vintage commented.

"I can see how you might not want one of those to have greater intellect than humans but not have emotions. Cold, hard logic would dictate all of its decisions."

"And then we might be toast," Tai said as he slapped his friend on the back of his jet pack. "Ok, let's roll! Or, float, anyway," Tai urged.

They spent the next couple of hours hopping, dropping, and jetting from platform to platform, each with its own unique structure and purpose. They met a lot of proud, adventurous people. People with every skill set imaginable. Tai knew many of them, as he made regular trips to bring supplies. Vintage noticed one glaring lack of an essential, however.

"Hey Tai, all this looks great, but I haven't seen one garden or food source. People don't need to eat on the moon, or what?"

"Very funny," Tai said. "Come on, it's time to go underground."

Tai led his guest to what the locals called a 'crater drop'. It was basically an elevator which brought people from the surface down into the underground tunnels of the colonies, and vice-versa. They stopped on level five.

"You wanted to see agriculture. Well, here it is," Tai said happily.

They stood in a vast underground cylinder which stretched as far as the eye could see. Various crops grew on all sides of the cylinder.

"360 degrees of farming. Necessity not only is the mother of invention, it can also foster efficiency," Tai said. Vintage was stunned.

"Where do you get water?"

"The moon has lots of water, you just have to know where and how to get it. We have ice mines. The mines are pretty deep, which is why the crops are grown so far underground."

Vintage, still puzzled, asked, "And what about sunlight and air?"

"Good question," Tai admitted. "Air is produced by the life-support systems. The sunlight is magnified and reflected from the surface down, which gives enough light for the crops."

"Astonishing," Vintage gushed as he admired the vast subterranean works. "What other wonders are down here?"

"Mostly houses, a few parks, and some innovative businesses."

"Such as?"

"There's the Low G Drinking Game Hall, Low G Extreme Sports, Kung Float Fu, just to name a few."

"I'm putty in your hands," Vintage said.

"Low G drinking it is," Tai said enthusiastically. "And after that, Kung Float Fu, if you're up for it."

## Chapter 35

6 months later

Mr. Gray was on an official state visit to the Royal Region. However, his meeting with Queen Sitan was completely off the books. It was in a private room at the Royal Aquarium where the power brokers stood side by side watching the teeming sea life float effortlessly by. Mr. Gray, despite his usual disinterested demeanor, couldn't help but be excited and crack a congratulatory smile at the young ambitious queen.

"I bring strategic news of the highest importance, Your Highness," he stated in a satisfied manner as he casually watched a shark dart by.

"I don't have to pretend to be married to my loon of a husband anymore?" the royal lady quipped.

Mr. Gray casually glanced at her and said, "I'm afraid not even I can work such a miracle. After all, he is immortal, remember." A rainbow fish caught her eye for a moment.

"Can you at least tell me that his popularity numbers are down? It's starting to really eat at me."

Mr. Gray's pasty professional countenance chuckled a bit and said in a reassuring and confident tone, "Don't worry, my dear, you must have patience. However, the news I bring is even greater, much greater. One of our signals specialists has decoded audio from the otherworld feed. This will quantify exponentially the data at our disposal, which means we have a tactical advantage in technological development, of course."

This caused the queen to beam. Finally, she thought, an advantage had come their way. This was monumental. Her eyes said it all. She smiled in a deviant manner, "I'm happy to be working with you, Mr. Gray."

Mr. Gray nodded slowly and assured, "One day, my dear, the entire world will work for us," as they watched another shark pass.

## Chapter 36

The Rothsman banking family was a dynasty of immense proportions, second only to the Mason Black Clan in the hierarchy of control. David Rothsman, head of the Bank of His Majesty, controlled the banking structure of the Royal Region and was thus ultimately the power behind the throne. His younger brother, Troy Rothsman, was head of God's Bank, which provided the financial prowess to the Divine Nation. Both of them, ultimately, answered to Mason Black of World Corp. In the recent months, both had noticed some irregularities in certain areas of business in both their regions. It was no cause for alarm, but was a matter which needed attention, nonetheless.

Rothsman Cliff Estates was a multi-castle complex situated in the foothills of the Royal Region. It was in David's creepy medieval monolith with carefully crafted modern amenities that the brothers met. The meeting had been requested by David.

David sat comfortably in his custom-made lounge chair across from Troy who was lounging comfortably on a fine leather sofa. Both sipped at some midday cognac out of highball crystal.

"Troy, I asked you here to discuss some irregularities I've noticed recently."

Troy gave an agreeable look and added, "Yes, I've noticed some strange happenings as well. What's the concern, brother?"

David tossed back his thick hair and swirled his glass slowly, "I've noticed some very large transactions going to companies I've never heard of before. It might be nothing, but the numbers were high enough to cause concern."

Troy looked at his brother keenly and asked, "I see. Could you give me some specifics?"

David nodded and explained, "Yes, the biggest thing that drew my attention is the huge jump in funds that Barack has moved from Royal Corp. to the International Freedom Foundation. It's far above normal and it puzzles me as to why he would do such a thing." His face wrinkled uncomfortably at the thought of subversive dealings by his underling Mr. Bush and continued, "Another oddity is that Royal Corp. has continued the same amount of military funding to the Royal Region, despite the fact that the war is over. I find this extremely odd because Sitan is not to be at war again for some time, as you know. There have also been some strange companies and foundations pop up in the Royal Region, such as the Cat Foundation and the Pink Pastry and Ornament Corporation. What do you make of all this?"

Troy tapped his glass thoughtfully and suggested, "Well, you know the new Sitan is near completely mad, so maybe that's got something to do with it. And you remember that stupid first speech he gave, where he promised a free cat for everyone, so maybe that explains the Cat Foundation. However, it's hard to figure how Bush would be financing such ventures." His next thought made him belly laugh a bit before speaking, "Unless Bush has gone off his rocker, too."

David ruffled his hair and in a conspiratorial voice muttered, "Either off his rocker, or more likely, Bush has some clever idea he's putting into action. Not to mention, how do you explain all the extra going to the IFF?"

Troy took a slow sip of the cognac and agreed, "Yeah, Barack is no fool. Perhaps you're onto something. How much are we talking?"

David replied sharply, "Hundreds of billions."

Troy's face flushed, "That's a lot of cats and pastries. I might as well tell you now about the bizarre happenings in my region of a similar nature. A couple hundred billion that we can't account for has been moved from Point of Light Energy into various smaller upstarts. There are too many to name, but the biggest one that caught my eye was False Profit Taco Factory."

"Wait," David cut him off, "If the money didn't come from your bank, and it didn't come from my bank, that leaves only two alternatives."

"Exactly," Troy continued, "Which means that the money is coming either from Liberty Bank or from Mason Black himself through World Corp. The question is, how do we figure out where the money is coming from and why?"

David upended the final swig of the pricey liqueur and said, "Well, we can't just go around making accusations, now can we? I have serious doubts that Mason is involved. I say we go straight to Mason and show him what we've found. I have a feeling there's some dark dealings going on, but we can't just sit on this info. We need to go to the top." Troy agreed and made a call to World Corp. to get the wheels in motion.

## Chapter 37

"I've got a surprise for you," the queen said in a seductive and playful manner. She was leaning on one of the giant white columns in the royal bedchamber. A shadowy figure was lurking on the other side of the column and out of her range of vision. "Things are going better than expected, my darling. I had a meeting with Mr. Gray," she spoke just above a whisper.

"I see. And what is Mr. Gray doing for us now, my dear?"

She giggled as she replied.

"They cracked the sound code. Now we've got the edge. Things are moving fast and in our favor. Are you happy?"

The man in the shadows smiled a devilish grin.

"You're doing wonderful, my dear."

"As are you, my darling, as are you," came her soft reply.

## Chapter 38

"Thanks for meeting us on such short notice, Mason," Troy Rothsman said to his boss as he took a practice golf swing.

Mason smiled, "I'm always glad to get a round of golf in. I just had this course finished about a month ago and this is the first chance I've had to play it."

David Rothsman leaned on his driver as he admired the lush green vistas and sparkling waters of the new course, "Yeah, she's a beauty. It is a matter of some importance that we've requested this meeting, however."

Mason took a hefty hack at the first tee and drove it hard but way out of bounds. "Too bad I don't have more time to devote to my golf game, I sure could use it," he said with remorse as he lined up for another shot. "Very well, David, what's on your mind?"

"You see, Mason, we've noticed some, shall we say, discrepancies in cash flow lately, some very odd maneuvers, you might say," David explained curtly.

Mason swung again and this time hit it square and drove it dead center about 240. After the triumphant drive, he turned his attention to his long time business partners and with serious eyes asked, "What kind of discrepancies exactly? You're up, David."

Troy took over as his brother lined up for his first drive. "Hundreds of billions have been moved from Point of Light Energy and Royal Corp. into unknown startups in the Royal Region and also the Divine Nation, all without our approval. Even more curious is that Royal Corp. has greatly increased its donations to the International Freedom Foundation."

Mason Black commented harshly but with an amused grin, "You call hundreds of billions a discrepancy?"

David drove into a sand trap for the second time in a row and threw his hands up in surrender. "You're up, Troy. Yeah, maybe not the best choice of words. The bottom line is that Bush and Rockateller have to know about at least a good chunk of these transactions. I don't see how it could be otherwise."

Mason Black nodded his neatly cropped top in agreement and said, "True enough, true enough," as he stared out towards the green. "Have you told anyone else about this?" he asked as he turned abruptly to the younger Rothsman.

"Not a soul. We thought the first thing we should do is to consult with you, and here we are."

The well-built Mason gave a sharp look to the brothers and asked, "So what do you think is going on? What's the endgame?"

Troy lined up and took a quick hack, driving powerfully into a pond. "I'll drop there, let's go," he conceded. They piled into a shiny tricked out golf cart and took off in a flash, riding rough over the deceptive slopes.

Stepping out of the cart Troy gave his assessment, "Honestly, it doesn't look good. It's too much money to be nothing. The question in my mind is, how do we go about finding the truth of the matter without raising suspicion?"

"The answer is simple," Black commanded, "We do nothing."

"Sir?" questioned David.

"Yet," continued the methodical Mr. Black, "We do nothing yet. I want to let it go for a while. If something underhanded is in the works, we'll give them enough time and enough rope to hang themselves. If it's nothing of great consequence, it'll pass."

"And in the meantime?" asked Troy.

"In the meantime," Black concluded with fierce eyes, "We conduct business as usual and keep our eyes open."

## Chapter 39

### Six Months Later

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this!" Luz shrieked at Jovius.

"You'll be great! Tell her she'll be great, Vintage," Jovius said as he patted her on the back.

"You'll be great!" Vintage assured her.

The two had talked Luz into joining their act, which was no small task. It had taken a few days to pull off, but she finally had given in. Her main reason for doing it was to have more time with her man, but she also had a desire, deeply hidden, to perform in front of an audience. She was just deathly afraid of such a scenario, that was all. But now she had managed to pluck up the courage and give it a shot. After all, what did she have to lose? Now they were about to go up on stage for the first time, in front of a few thousand eager spectators at the Coast City Arts Fest.

"And look on the bright side," Vintage added, "If you completely bomb, you'll always have me."

Luz's face tightened, "You're not helping."

"You're not alone," Tai said consolingly as he rolled his narrow eyes. He sighed and continued, "It's my first time in front of a crowd, too."

"Ok, showtime!" Jovius announced as he led the way up the steps to the spotlight. The roar of the crowd as Jovius hopped up on stage carried Luz and Vintage in tow.

Jovius, wearing a ludicrous jester-style crown of gold and diamonds, greeted the raucous crowd enthusiastically under a crystal clear starry night sky.

"Good evening, everyone! All of you are here because of the incredible rumors you've heard, no doubt! You are surely wondering, and rightly so, could it be true? The man from the other side of the wall has arrived, that is not in question, but can such ignorance as he possesses really be possible? Prepare to be shocked and amazed!"

Vintage came into the spotlight with as dopey a look on his face as he could muster and waved adoringly to the crowd. Jovius' face took on a shocked look as he pointed to Luz on the other side of the stage. She was engaged in voluntary trade with Tai, passing various objects between the two and talking happily together. Jovius grabbed Vintage by the shoulder and said to him, "Look over there! Do you see that?" Vintage exclaimed that he did, and the dialogue began:

Jovius: They are trading and must be taxed! Listen here, my good man, so that we may keep the peace and avoid chaos, we must collect taxes from them! No one is above the law! I'll tell you what, my good man, go over there and take half of their goods, and bring it all to me."

Vintage said in a fearful tone, "Well, I want to avoid chaos to be sure, but I can't just walk over there and take their stuff, can I?"

Jovius scratched his head as if to think deeply and replied, "I'll tell you what." He held up high a blue police shirt with a badge on it and waved it around in the air so the crowd could get a good look at it. "I'll give you this special shirt and now you can go over there and take half his stuff and bring it to me, and it'll be perfectly legal. Not only

legal, but necessary, I say! Not only that, but I'll pay you an infinitesimal share of the loot! You need to do it, so that I may protect you and provide for you!"

Vintage shrugged his shoulders and said, in the goofiest voice he could muster, "Golly, that sounds good to me!" He took the shirt and put it on with boastful mannerisms and strode over to Luz and Tai.

"I've got to take half of your stuff, in the name of peace and security!" Vintage cried.

Luz and Tai looked at each other with wide eyes of disbelief. Luz, looking upset, raised her voice at the man in the funny shirt and badge.

"Who told you to do that?"

Vintage pointed to Jovius who was waiting impatiently with his arms crossed and his head cocked proudly in the air, "That man over there with the funny crown on his head."

Tai cocked his head back and asked, "That man in the crazy looking crown told you to come over here and steal half our stuff?"

Vintage got an attitude and defended his position arrogantly, "Yeah, that's right, and it's not stealing, it's taxation."

Luz put her hands on her hips as her anger grew, "If you're taking something against our will, it is stealing, no matter what you call it!"

Vintage stood his ground, "Well, it's the law, so pay up!"

Tai sounded off, "Who's law? Ask that crowned fool over there what law he's speaking of." Vintage yelled across the stage to Jovius.

"They want to know who's law it is!"

"It's man's law!" Jovius yelled.

Tai shook his head sadly, "If man's law is in opposition to Natural Law, then it is wrong and immoral. You don't have to do what he says. It's not right! You have a choice!"

Jovius screamed back, "But you must obey! You don't want to live in poverty, do you? You want protection, don't you?"

Luz shook her head, "Don't believe him. He's using words to manipulate your mind! If you take our stuff, you'll be culpable for your actions! Don't let him control you!"

Jovius yelled back, "Don't listen to those crazy conspiracy theorists! Natural Law doesn't exist!"

Luz cried out defiantly, "He is occulting the truth! He is obfuscating the truth and making you believe in a false reality. You don't have the right to take our stuff! Man cannot grant or take away rights. We all have equal rights, and that man in the funny crown is no different, and neither are you!"

Vintage became frantically uneasy and covered his eyes with one hand and an ear with another. He yelled, "No, no, I don't want to know! Shutup! I don't want to know!" He then grabbed a gun and pointed it at Luz and Tai with a shaky hand. "Give me half, I must obey the law!"

The crowd gasped in a mix of horror and laughter. How preposterous! They sadly handed over half of their possessions. Vintage carried the items back to Jovius who gleefully accepted the goods.

"Well done! Here is your payment, you fool! I mean, uh, server and protector." He held out a piece of paper with Jovius' picture on it, in quite the arrogant pose.

Confused, Vintage asked, "What's this? I thought I was getting some of the loot."

Jovius assured his policeman, "It is! This piece of paper can be used to buy things, anything you want, in fact!"

Vintage eyed an apple and said, "Ok, then, I'd like to buy that apple."

Jovius gave a pouty face and replied, "I'm sorry, you don't have enough paper to buy this apple. You'll have to collect more taxes to buy it."

Vintage, sad and upset, pleaded, "But I thought you said..."

Tai screamed across the stage and interrupted, "Wrong! You didn't think! You chose to be ignorant and ignore the truth!"

Jovius continued, "No time for thinking now, my good man! You need to relax and enjoy yourself! I have just the thing for you! Look at that flashing box over there!"

Vintage turned his attention to a TV set which was changing randomly between various channels and forms of entertainment. Jovius continued, "You see, my good man, on that box you can feel whatever you want! You have comedies to make you happy, dramas to tug your emotions, sports to give you simulated combat, anything and everything to make you feel what you want to feel and think what you need to think! Enjoy, my good man!"

Vintage happily turned his attention to the TV set and started laughing uncontrollably at the funny people and animals being displayed on the colorful screen. The screen changed after a moment and a very serious and professional looking man in a suit with a deep voice came on.

"Who is that?" Vintage asked Jovius.

"That's called a newscaster! He will amaze you and inform you with what to worry about."

The newscaster reported passionately, "There are fanatics on the other side of the world who want to murder you. In order to save yourself, you must go murder them before they get you!"

Vintage turned frantically to Jovius, "Oh my! Is that true?"

Jovius assured him, "Yes, absolute truth comes from that flashing box. You must go murder people so they won't kill you! You don't want to die, do you?"

Vintage responded, "Certainly not!"

Jovius encouraged him as if speaking to a child, "Well, then, son, be brave and go murder to save your life and to keep your freedom. Here, put on this camouflage uniform, take this weapon, and go over there and murder them! Hurry!"

Vintage quickly threw on the military fatigues and ran over to Luz and Tai. Luz asked him, "What a strange costume you're wearing! What brings you to our part of the world, stranger?"

Vintage cried desperately, "That man in the crazy golden hat and the authoritative voice in that flashing box told me that I need to murder you!"

Tai, revolted, responded, "Why in the world would you need to murder us?"

"They said that you wanted to murder me! So now I must murder you first so that I might survive!" Vintage exclaimed.

"We're just sitting here selling bread and talking," said Luz. "We don't want to murder you, I can assure you. If you take an act of aggression against us by murdering us, you'll be committing a very grave act of violence."

Jovius yelled, "Don't listen to them! The flashing box and I speak truth!"

Vintage pulled out a gun and pointed it at Tai.

Tai held up his hand, "Wait! If you aggress against me, you're in the wrong, no matter what anyone tells you. You don't have the right to murder me or anyone else. However, if you take an act of violence against me, I do have the right to defend myself with the use of force."

Vintage turned back to Jovius and screamed, "What should I do?"

Jovius explained, "That funny uniform I gave you gives you special rights to murder! You won't receive any punishment, I assure you! Murder him, and I'll give you more paper!"

When Vintage turned back around, Tai had a gun pointed back at him. Tai asked, "Do you intend to murder me?"

Vintage, shaking and sweating, screamed, "Yes, I must!"

Tai pulled the trigger, the gun made a loud pop, and Vintage dropped to the floor. Tai looked at Luz and somberly stated, "How unfortunate, people dying and suffering because they choose to be ignorant and take actions based in fear and falsehood!"

Vintage, gasping for breath, spoke with difficulty, "But he told me to do it. I was under orders."

Luz shook her head sadly, "You alone are responsible for your actions and your actions have produced these sad results, suffering and loss of life."

The curtain closed and the crowd rose to their feet, cheering wildly. A moment later, the curtain opened again, and the four performers took a bow.

The next day Luz and Vintage decided to have some alone time. She was extremely relieved that her performance was over and wanted to enjoy the afterglow of what in her mind amounted to survival. They were walking the promenade on the coast when Luz had an idea.

"Have you ever seen an aquaponics farm?" she asked.

Vintage shook his head, "I don't even know what aquaponics is. It sounds cool, though. What is it?"

Stunned, Luz chided him playfully, "You've never heard of aquaponics? Wow, you're like a caveman or something."

Vintage decided to play along and started beating his chest and grunting.

"Aquaponics is an agriculture method, but in bodies of water, like the ocean or a lake. And we're close to the largest aquaponics farm in the world right now. We should check it out," she recommended as she grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and imagine that in order to see this floating farm, we'd go on the water somehow, probably by boat."

"You are a genius! One of the reasons I love you!" she wailed with a laugh.

He looked bashful and this caught her attention.

"What's the deal?" she asked.

"It's kind of embarrassing, but I guess you'll find out eventually, so I might as well tell you," he said in a quiet tone as if anyone around could hear or would care for that matter.

"Does anyone else know?" she asked excitedly.

"Nope, you'll be the first," he admitted.

"Ooooooo, a secret! Tell me, tell me, tell me!"

"Ok, here it goes," he said as he turned red as a lobster, "I can't swim."

"What!" she exclaimed as her fine facial features exploded with surprise. "Why not?" she asked.

"Never learned how."

"Well, I can teach..." she said before he cut her off.

"Not today, sweetheart, not today."

"Ok, ok, that's fine, but we can still tour the farm. The boat is safe! We can even get one with a security force field on in to keep you from falling in."

"Really? That would be perfect!"

"Yeah, it's the one they use for small children," she tortured him softly.

"Very funny."

"So we're going?" she shouted happily.

"Yep, lead the way."

They walked a ways down the picturesque coast until they came to their destination. There was a small kiosk on the edge of the promenade where they sold tour tickets. A pleasant old gentleman greeted them and explained the options.

"You can take the basic tour where you only get to look. If you want the plus tour, then you can take as much produce as you can carry by hand, and that includes fish. All the boats are equipped with fishing equipment so you have to catch the fish yourself. We'll also transport your goods up to ten miles if you need it."

"We'll take the plus, please!" Luz said.

"Very well," the old man said. He reached to a shelf under him and pulled out two little electronic tabs about a centimeter square each.

"You each need to wear one of these. It'll allow your arms to move past the force fields that protect the crops. You can take any boat that you like," he said as he motioned towards a large fleet of water cruisers. "Just please use common sense and don't take the biggest boat. We might have some larger parties later. Other than that, you're all set. The computer on board will have all the info you need for the tour."

As they were about to scamper off to the water, Luz stopped herself and suddenly remembered about needing the child safety on the boat.

"Oh, just one more thing..." she said.

Vintage stopped her and said, "No, that's ok, we're good."

She looked at him skeptically, "Are you sure?"

"Yep, let's go," he assured with an embarrassed look.

As they walked off she whispered, "You didn't want him to know. Are you that embarrassed?"

He sighed and answered with a grimace, "I'll take a risk, why not? Besides, if I fall in, you can save me, right?"

Her face wrinkled with doubt, "Well, I'm not that great of a swimmer, but maybe I could."

They picked out a sleek little four-seater and Luz jumped in first. A reluctant Vintage cautiously stepped into the machine he was entrusting his life to.

"You've got nothing to worry about," she tried to comfort him.

"Famous last words," he said pessimistically.

Luz scanned the on-board instructions and got everything going. It was simple, really, mostly everything was automatic. All they had to do was point on the digital map of the farm where they wanted to go and the computer handled the rest. Autonomous vehicles like this were popular for tourism excursions where the vehicle operator was in unfamiliar territory. They could also select the speed they wanted to go and stop the boat when they were ready to pick. They started off into the blue-green oasis.

"I can't believe how far it stretches!" Vintage exclaimed as he peered as far as the eye could see.

"No kidding," Luz agreed. "It's the largest one in the world. It supplies food for the whole city!"

"How big is the city?" Vintage asked.

"I think it's around forty thousand or so. It's nice to visit, but I'd never want to live in a place this crowded, that's for sure!"

Vintage laughed uncontrollably. "You think this is crowded? Forty thousand! Do you know how many people live in the city I'm from?"

"I have a feeling I don't want to know."

"Over ten million!"

"Oh my God! How can you breathe? And why would so many people want to live crammed on top of each other like that?"

"Everyone lives in cities where I come from, at least anyone and everyone not involved in food production. It's the law that you have to live in the city, for conservation purposes. The government says that resources are scarce and that it's more efficient and better for the environment if everyone lives in cities. To live outside the city, you need a special permit from the government."

"Wow, that's terrible!" Luz yelled with a frown that accented her dimples. "Oh, we're at a broccoli field! Let's stop!" Luz said emphatically as she hit the red button on the control panel. The boat crawled slower and came to a sleepy stop. She reached out and her hands penetrated the force field with a 'zip' noise and pulled out two jumbo heads of broccoli.

"So who produces food for all those people in the cities then?" she asked as she restarted the boat.

About to comment on how naive a comment that was, Vintage reminded himself that he was living in the exact opposite form of society that he had been accustomed to for so many years.

"Corporations produce all the food. Agronomists and other specialists are trained in the Department of Work Preparation, which is run by the government. Then, after becoming certified, if the specialist has any luck landing a job at a corporation, then the government gives that person a license."

"Wow, so you know nothing about growing any crops, gardening, or anything like that?" Luz asked.

"Nope, of course not, because I'm a writer. Not many people do. It's illegal to grow food without a license and it's also illegal to grow in the city."

Luz frowned and grumbled, "That's so, so sad."

"Wow, is that corn coming up?" Vintage asked with surprising passion for such a simple thing. Luz scanned the horizon.

"Yep, sure enough. Wow, those stalks are tall! They must be almost ten feet high! If you should happen to fall overboard, sweetheart, you can use one of those to pull yourself up!"

"Still not funny," he objected. She smiled and kissed him softly on the cheek.

"I'll let you have the honors of picking it," she said. "From what you've told me about where you live, it sounds like absolute hell. How can people stand it?"

Will laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"That's a great question, my love. There are some people who are genuinely unhappy about the state of affairs over there, but they are few and far between and usually keep their mouths shut out of fear. They are afraid of being turned in to the authorities. Other people are so drugged out of their minds that they're numb to everything. They just go about from task to task, mindlessly performing their function in society. They're depressed, so internally they know something is wrong, which is why the government happily gives them drugs to keep them sedated, yet functional. Then there is the vast majority of people, who have swallowed the indoctrination since they were born, from the media and the school system, all day, every day, pounding it into their skulls. They can't imagine any other way."

"You just hit the nail on the head," she interrupted.

"Pardon me?" he asked.

"Imagination is one of the keys. From the way it sounds, the people that control the corporations and the government are scientifically destroying the imagination of everyone else that's not at the top of the control structure. Without imagination to create new and better possibilities within the mind, then nothing can ever change for the better in the physical reality. It all starts in the mind. The mind is the cause of physical manifestations, which are only the effects. For example, before this boat was built, it was first conceived of in the mind. That's why they keep the children in government run schools so much, only allowing parents to see their sons and daughters once a month, so that there is no chance the parents can influence their children in any other way of thinking. My God! You even told me that children aren't allowed to ask questions in school! It's sooooo diabolical!"

Vintage sighed and said, "Yeah, and I was no different. I believed in all of it. The money, the authority, the violence, man's laws, schooling, on and on! Hell, I was part of it! I wrote propaganda pieces to help support the control structure!" He became visibly shaken.

Luz put her arm around his shoulder and consoled him, "But you came out of it! And here you are! Look at you! Your mind is free and so are you!"

He focused straight ahead on the approaching floating corn field. He turned to her and asked, "Do you think there will ever be freedom where I come from?"

Her eyes hardened with uncertainty. "It's hard to say, to be honest. It's always possible, but to say for certain that it is inevitable would be a mistake. I hope with all my heart that they find the truth."

Vintage looked sullen and thoughtful.

"You're thinking about going back one day, aren't you? I can see it in your eyes," she asked with a twinge of sadness. She stopped the boat and they parked in front of the corn field.

"I had the dream again last night," he said without looking at her. He couldn't bear to look at her at the moment.

"The woman and the child. You've been having that dream more frequently lately, haven't you? Have you been getting the headaches, too?"

"Yes, the same woman and child. Like I know them from my past somehow, a feeling in my gut. I've been having the headaches, too, but luckily today I don't have one. They don't always accompany the dream."

"Who do you think they are?"

He stared into the abyss below the boat as he responded, "I don't know who they are, I honestly have no idea, but I feel that someday I need to find out."

"So you have a personal reason to return to the other side one day, but is that it? Do you have other thoughts or feelings about returning?"

"Absolutely. I can't just have this knowledge and not do something positive with it. That's not right. I have an obligation to share this knowledge with those on the other side. I have to at least try, or else I'm no better than the controllers who occult the information in the first place, right?"

She quivered and replied, "No, I can't argue with you there. You will have to, one day."

He stared deeper and deeper into the abyss as his mind and heart ran wild.

"I have to try and spark their imaginations. Perhaps it will just be like one drop of water at first, but if I can reach even just one person, and that person another, until exponentially that one drop of water is multiplied millions of times over, given enough time, it will become a vast ocean and the tide will sweep away all the slavery and suffering and waves of freedom will rhythmically flow in that new ocean of consciousness."

He turned to her and she said with soft doe eyes, "You are a good writer."

He smiled at her beauty and they shared a passionate kiss.

## Chapter 40

Marcos Ayuda had been helping people cure themselves for decades. He, like most who worked regularly with medicine, didn't like the title of doctor. It was looked upon as being too limited. Marcos was no exception. Not only was he brilliant at helping people defeat their health problems, he was also a fiction writer and superb piano player. He was an acquaintance of Ray and Sophia, so when Vintage was suffering from his worst headache yet, one which nearly made their friend incapacitated, they insisted he go see Mister Marcos.

"How long have you had these headaches?" Marcos asked.

Vintage cringed a great deal from the stabbing pain in his temples and at the back of his skull.

"They've been coming and going for the past year, but have been getting much more frequent and exponentially more severe."

Marcos had a focused stare at his patient's face.

"Tell him about your memory problem," Ray suggested from across the room.

Marcos raised an eyebrow in anticipation.

"It's very strange," Vintage began to explain as he struggled through the pain, "I can remember certain things about my past, like the name of the president, how society works, but no personal memories. However, lately I've been having flashes of clouded images enter my mind, which I assume are personal memories. I see a woman and a small boy, we're talking and laughing together for a moment, then everything becomes a horrible distortion and they fade away." He paused and took a deep breath to gather his emotions and attempt to block the pain.

"Go on," Sophia encouraged from over his shoulder.

"Sometimes the memories happen when I'm conscious, but most often, they occur as dreams, which adds to the confusion, because how can I really know if it's a true memory, or just a dream?" Vintage sagged on the medical observation table.

Marcos turned away for a moment and pondered the information quietly. Turning back to face Vintage, "Ok, I think the first thing to do is take a 3D brain scan to see if we can find something physically wrong. If not, then we'll have to go deeper with a hyper-dimensional scan."

Vintage nodded in painful agreement.

Marcos walked over to a giant shelf filled with gadgets and gizmos attached to the wall and took a small triangular device. He approached Vintage and hit a button to activate the handheld scanner which took the needed readings and gave a shrill beep when finished. The keen Latino hit another switch on the scanner and a large holographic display of Vintage's brain appeared in the middle of the room. Ray and Sophia were used to seeing such wonders, but Vintage still was taken aback by the miraculous technology, despite his long presence in the new world.

Marcos studied the image carefully for a few tense minutes. Sophia and Ray paced back and forth near the image. Vintage stared at the floor, breathed deeply and tried not to think about the pain.

"Uhhh-huh," Marcos casually grunted.

Vintage narrowed his eyes and wrinkled his nose.

"Uhhh-huh," once again from the curious examiner.

Vintage pleaded, "Ok, doc, was that a bad uhhh-huh, a good uhhh-huh? Please don't keep me in suspense."

Marcos looked away from the brain model and talked directly to the worried man seated behind him.

"It was more of a combination of relief and fascination," Marcos explained matter-of-factly. "I'm fascinated at what I found, and relieved that it's an easy fix," he added with a tone of optimism.

Vintage's face lit up, "Easy fix?"

"Yeah, that's the good news," Marcos confirmed. "The bad news is that you've got electronics implanted in your head, which I'm assuming you didn't know about."

Ray and Sophia's jaws dropped at the news. Vintage was more puzzled than anyone and with a look of disbelief said, "What? How?"

Marcos held up a hand to encourage calm. "Yes, this raises some questions, to be sure," Marcos said. "Come here and we'll take a closer look at the model together."

Vintage almost didn't want to know. How could this be? Could there be some clues to his past secreted away in his skull? He approached Marcos and his brain hologram apprehensively as did Sophia and Ray.

Marcos began, "It appears that there are three devices, one in your forehead between your eyes, one directly opposite on the back side of your head, and a third is lodged near your brain stem."

"What are they?" Vintage cried as he stared at his brain in shock.

"Let's have a look," Marcos said calmly and then commanded, "Computer, magnify area F3 by a factor of one-hundred.

The image changed to an unrecognizable cluster of bright spots, criss-crossing fibers, and globes of various sizes. Stuck in the middle of that chaotic mess was what looked eerily similar to a camera of microscopic proportions.

"It appears to be a camera, but we should confirm it with the computer. Computer, is there a camera present in area F3?" Marcos asked as he started to get a bit anxious himself.

"Confirmed," came the tinny reply.

"Computer, show area B3, magnification factor one-hundred," Marcos ordered.

A similarly chaotic vision inside the human head appeared with a similar looking device in the mix.

"Computer, is that another camera?"

"Confirmed," came the robotic answer.

The tension grew in the room as the cold confirmations continued.

Marcos drew a big gulp of air, "Computer, show area S1, magnification one-hundred."

A beautiful crystalline structure was put vividly on display.

"Can you see it?" Marcos asked as he leaned towards the projection and squinted.

"I see something that looks like an antenna," Ray said with a twinge of discomfort.

"Computer, identify non-organic material in area S1," Marcos ordered.

"The non-organic material in area S1 is a multi-array video and audio transmitter," the computer coldly explained.

Vintage started to have a cold sweat drip down his face and his back. Marcos sighed and looked at Vintage with uncertainty.

"Would you like to see what is being transmitted?" he asked a bit timidly. Ray and Sophia stood breathless. Not what they expected to happen when they woke up on an otherwise ho-hum Tuesday.

"I'd like nothing more," Vintage expressed in a low tone as he shivered a bit.

"Computer, is the transmitter sending a transmission from the two cameras in areas B3 and F3?" Marcos asked with wide eyes.

"Confirmed," came the frigid answer.

"Computer, is it possible to display the video and audio being transmitted?"

"Yes, it's possible, but decryption of access code is required."

"Can you decrypt, please?" Marcos wearily requested as he rubbed his neck.

"Decryption in progress," came the heartless reply.

There was a distressed feeling permeating the room. No one spoke as they waited with anticipation.

"Video decryption complete."

Puzzled, Marcos asked, "The video does not include audio?"

"Correct, Marcos," the computer affirmed.

"Is the audio on a separate channel?" Marcos asked in a perplexed tone as he scratched his thick black head of hair.

"Confirmed. A separate audio channel with a separate decryption code exists on a separate layer of the transmission."

"Decrypt audio and merge with video, please," Marcos ordered impatiently.

Another icy silence.

"Audio decrypted and merged with video. Display now?"

"Yes, please."

"It is a two dimensional transmission and will be displayed as such," the computer informed. A video was projected onto the white wall behind the group of captivated onlookers.

It was a live video of the video display wall and Marcos, which were in front of Vintage, and a separate video of the wall opposite which had the giant shelf of gadgets on it, directly behind Vintage.

"Turn your head, please, Vintage," Marcos slowly requested.

There was an echo as the streaming video repeated Marcos' words. When Vintage turned his head, the video of the room shifted and showed a concerned Sophia and Ray. Vintage slowly turned back to face Marcos.

Vintage turned powder white. Who was he, really? What was he? It was too much. With a stiff face and a tear rolling down his cheek, Vintage spoke through clenched teeth, "Take them out, now."

Marcos didn't waste any time.

"Computer, can you deactivate both cameras and the transmitter with an electromagnetic pulse?"

"Affirmative," came the emotionless answer.

"Computer, what are the chances of causing damage to the brain?"

The next seconds seemed eternal, then, "There is less than one hundredth of one percent chance of causing brain damage."

Marcos looked at Vintage who gave the nod to proceed.

"After they are deactivated, shall I go ahead and remove the devices? The procedure will probably take a couple of hours." explained Marcos with a look of sympathy.

"Absolutely. My life is in your hands," Vintage said as his mind was racing.

Marcos turned to Sophia and Ray, "Like I said, it'll be a couple of hours. If you'd like, you can wait in the next room."

Ray and Sophia nodded as they approached Vintage and gave him a pat on the back to offer some sort of comfort. "We'll wait for you. Don't worry. We'll be right here for you when it's done; you can count on us," Ray encouraged his friend.

## Chapter 41

Programmer 0777 could barely keep her eyes open. She wasn't accustomed to working this late, but she was deeply involved in some daunting details of her current project and refused to quit until she had everything perfect.

She was in the midst of nodding off at her cluttered desk when one of her co-workers burst in frantically and sent a jolt up her spine.

"Oh my God, you scared me!" she screamed at signals specialist 5501.

"We've lost the transmission, and you're the only one still here!" he yelled in a high pitched tone of frenzy.

This made 0777 perk up and in a state of groggy disbelief, she asked, "Are you sure? Let's have a look at the live feed."

The gaunt graveyard shift signals specialist flipped a switch on his portable control pad to send the feed directly to the screen on 0777's desk. It was pitch black.

She looked at the nervous techie with a skeptical eye, "What did you do?" He threw his hands up and said he didn't do anything. It just suddenly went black, all on its own. Greatly puzzled, she asked if she could see the final minute of the transmission. He quickly obliged her curiosity and put the final moments of the other-worldly feed on the medium sized flat screen on her desk. There was nothing but a flat white surface in a bright room. The person sending the signal looked to be laying down and staring at a ceiling. Then came a cool and controlled voice, "Computer, start EMP wave now." Within seconds of this command, the screen went black.

This greatly startled 0777 as she sat up in her chair and leaned closer to the hollow blackness on the screen.

"Sound? Why was there sound?" she asked hurriedly.

The young signals man looked down at the floor and sheepishly.

"Oh, with all the excitement, I forgot to mention that. Sorry, there was sound for about ten minutes before the transmission dropped."

0777's eyes were now wide with interest and she excitedly requested to see the video with sound from the beginning. He nodded and within moments there was a view of two of Marcos' medical office walls and then came the familiar voice, "Take them out, now."

She froze. She sat breathless for a moment and didn't blink. She knew that voice. Oh God, did she know that voice, and love that voice. How could it be? It's impossible, she thought.

"Are you ok?" 5501 asked in a bewildered manner.

After a chilled moment and with her hands shaking, 0777 managed to mutter, "Please, go back again."

"To the beginning of the sound?" 5501 wanted confirmation.

She nodded with bulging eyes and mouth draped open.

"Take them out, now," came the voice of her husband, the father of her child, the man who she had hoped so desperately to return. And there he was, on the other side of the world. Could this really be happening? It felt too much like a bad dream. There was a contrast of misty glow and darkness lurking around the uncertain subconscious corner. Perhaps her heart and brain were playing tricks on her. This wasn't possible.

"Play it again," she ordered. Unsure as to the importance of that one line or that special voice, 5501 did as he was told.

"Take them out, now."

She burst into tears. A violent blend of emotion overtook her soul and she shook with anguish. Time ceased to exist as she fled home to be alone. Questions were not consciously running through her mind, they more or less melted through her system in a shower of liquid consciousness. Why was he there? How long would he be over there? Would she ever see him again? Could she find a way to contact him? What would she tell their son? Should she continue working on the project? Could she keep herself together emotionally and focus on her work after realizing that all info studied in the project was a first person account from her husband?

## Chapter 42

Vintage looked worse than a ghost. It wasn't from the minor procedure to remove the devices from his head. It was an all-encompassing shock of uncertainty that flooded his every pore. When he had first awoken on this side of the planet, he had a similar sensation, but this was exponentially worse. He thought he was getting his life on track, had so many good friends, had a woman who was amazing beyond words, was learning so much and felt happy, and now this. It cast a shadow over everything. He still didn't have clear memories of his past. He had vague dreams and flashes of what seemed to be real, but how could he be sure? And now this. Someone obviously had a vested interest in the information he was gathering. Was he a willing accomplice and not know it? Who had done this? Too many questions, and even fewer answers.

"Hey, you're gonna make it through this. We're with you, Vintage. I know it's hard, but we'll stick with you," Sophia tried to offer comfort as Ray was driving them back to their house.

Vintage didn't respond. He felt numb.

"He'll be ok, Sophie, just give him time. He needs time," Ray told her quietly as he peered at his friend in the back seat.

When they arrived home and walked in the front door, Vintage more or less glided in subconsciously as he was functioning on cruise control. He did manage to mutter something soft and a bit incoherent.

"How do you..." Pause, flinch, stammer. Ray and Sophia put their hands on his sagging shoulders and led him to the sofa. "..Know you can trust me?" he asked uncomfortably, with remorse in his eyes.

Ray and Sophia looked at each other. Could they trust him? After all they'd been through, they felt confident they could, but there was now a faint doubt cast into their minds. Their intuition, however, led them to believe that their friend was an unwitting character in a grand scheme of ill repute. They couldn't hold this against him, especially due to his lack of coherent memory. Why didn't he remember anything personal, but could recall most aspects of his national way of life? It seemed too strange and had to have a nefarious end hidden somewhere. Right now, though, they just wanted to help their friend find answers and deal with this crazy situation.

Sophia put her arm around Vintage and assured, "We trust you, don't worry. Whoever did this to you is conducting some awful business. We don't blame you. We want to help you."

Vintage sobbed and gave a nod of thanks.

"I'd like to be alone, if you don't mind," he somberly requested as he stared at the floor.

"Sure, of course. Get some rest. You know where to find us," Ray said in a voice of deep consolation.

## Chapter 43

Early the next day, Ray received an urgent call from Marcos.

“You’d better get Vintage down here, quick.”

It was early and Ray was still groggy.

“Why? What’s going on?”

A tired and wired Marcos said excitedly, “Better to explain in person, trust me. Please hurry.”

Sophia, surprised at the early call, sleepily asked, “What was that all about? Everything ok?”

“Apparently not. That was Marcos. He said to rush down there with Vintage.”

They went to wake their friend from a much needed slumber but found that he was not in bed. They then heard a faint heaving noise.

“Bathroom!” Sophia yelled, and the two scurried to see what was happening. Sure enough, Vintage was praying to the porcelain gods and vomiting violently. Ray’s eyes bugged out.

“Ok, ok, Vintage, we’re taking you back to see Marcos. Can you make it to the car?” With a swollen face Vintage grudgingly nodded yes.

Minutes later they arrived at Marcos’ house. Vintage walked up to the front door slowly with the support of his friends. Marcos came running out to help as he saw them approach.

They entered and Marcos ordered, “Help me get him on the table, I need to act quickly. I’ll explain later!”

They did as instructed and Vintage lay limp on the same table where he had had the surgery the day before. His mind was in an extreme fog. Was this the end? He felt so hot and yet cold at the same time. He thought death would be preferable to the pain and nausea that was controlling his body.

Marcos grabbed an L-shaped instrument and clamped it to Vintage’s head. He then injected a small needle into Vintage’s arm as he began to tremble. He held up a black control pad and started furiously pounding buttons. Then he stopped and stared at his special patient. Ray and Sophia stood by, breathless.

“What now? Why did you stop? What’s happening?” Ray pleaded with angst.

“Now,” said Marcos, “I’m hoping and waiting. Either this works, or it doesn’t.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Sophia asked meekly.

“We won’t talk about that just yet,” Marcos said softly as he stared at Vintage with a keen eye.

Ray squatted down next to the table where his friend was laying. Sophia paced back and forth as she sulked and quivered madly. Marcos stood like a statue as he observed his patient. Seconds seemed infinite. Time, actually, doesn’t exist in moments like that. Consciousness supersedes time in those moments. All is frozen and yet faster than light at the same time, one of the mysteries of the universe, one which science will never explain.

After twenty minutes of this agony of uncertainty, Marcos flinched.

“His vitals are improving.”

Moments later, Vintage gasped for air as if it were his first or his last and gulped it with desperate pleasure. His eyes popped open then sagged down to a normal level. Relief and joy filled the room.

Vintage looked over at Marcos, "You've got some splainin to do, doc," he said with a touch of irony in his voice. Everyone laughed and the stress dissipated.

Marcos brought a glass of sparkling blue electric fluid tableside and removed the device from Vintage's head.

"Please drink this. It's hyper water, especially designed for ultra-fast hydration. You lost a lot of fluid, and we almost lost you."

Vintage sat up and sipped at the sparkles. He then looked at Marcos expectantly.

"Ok, I know, you want an explanation. Well, here it goes. Try to keep your cool, ok? Your heart doesn't need any more stress, but I feel you need to know ASAP. I know I would want to if I were you."

Sophia and Ray stood tableside as Marcos continued.

"After you went home yesterday, I decided to examine the devices that were removed a little closer. It's not every day I get to examine technology from the other side of the wall. I have to say, in some respects, from what I know, your culture has extremely primitive technology and techniques, but in other respects it's not too dated." He paused to take a deep breath. "What I removed from you was, for lack of a better term, an interesting apparatus with multiple functions. The obvious function was to record and transmit video and audio, but upon closer inspection, two other, much more advanced functions were revealed. Both were electro-biochemical in nature, which is why I could identify them fairly quickly. The first one is a type of chemical which stunts neural activity, specifically memories. One of the devices was programmed to gradually and consistently keep a supply of the chemical flowing into selective areas of your brain."

Vintage held up a hand to pause Marcos.

"Are you telling me that my memories were erased?"

Marcos actually smiled at this point and refuted, "Thankfully, no. Your memory pathways were basically 'put to sleep', more or less."

Vintage interrupted and sat up on the table, "Hold on, doc. It sounds to me like, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I might have a chance at retrieving my memories?"

Marcos nodded in affirmation, "There's a very good chance of that. I can give your neurons a boost, if you like. We can speed up the natural process and you might have clear memories within days."

A wild swing of emotion swept the room. Joy and hope.

"There's more, though," continued Marcos, "The reason you almost died. Another thing I found was that the transmitter that I removed wasn't just a transmitter of audio and video, but something much more sinister. The device was programmed to eject a virus into your system upon removal. It is a synthetic virus which is designed to kill within twenty-four hours, hence the haste when I called this morning." That put a chill in the room.

Ray narrowed his eyes and said, "Whoever put those cameras in you didn't want you coming back, my friend."

Vintage stared at the wall, mind reeling. Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? He spoke slowly, "I must find answers."

Marcos agreed, "You'll find answers, I think. The first thing that needs to happen is for you to rest and recover. Once your memories return, the path to the answers you seek will surely open up. I'm quite confident."

Vintage sighed deeply and laid back down. He might find answers, but what would be the consequences?

## Chapter 44

A couple of gloomy days passed by. It was the rainy season and gray had overtaken the environment as well as the mood in Ray and Sophia's house. This was especially true in the heart and mind of Vintage. He felt confused. He felt utterly angry as well. Marcos had given him treatment to unblock his memories. Things were beginning to clear up a little. He saw a woman and a child in his mind but wasn't sure who they were. They were images with no names and no meaning, just faces. Marcos told him to be patient. Easy for him to say. The events of the past few days had taken a lot out of him, too. His head felt like swiss cheese. He felt weak and out of sync, ten times worse than when Ray had found him all that time ago.

A sudden jolt came through his mind and pain was all he could know. He buried his head in his pillow and started sweating cold bullets. Distorted flashes of images went through his mind like a TV set with a bad signal. He rolled around in anguish and gasped desperately for air. He tore at his curly hair. Pain seems like an eternity until it stops.

It stopped moments later and the pictures became clear. The woman, the child, his family! It was a wife, a child! His wife, his child! Names? Hold on, it's coming. Focus. 0777 and 2001! How revolting to be called a number, now that he had learned so much! He felt better, like a new man. He was whole again, he could remember!

He sprang out of bed and ran out to find Ray and Sophia. He burst into the kitchen to find them chatting and making coffee.

"I remember! The woman, the child! My family! My wife, my child!"

Ray and Sophia were caught off guard and a bit confused at first, but then came to the logical conclusion that the people from his dreams had finally become clear conscious memories.

"The woman and child from your dreams...are your wife and child, do I understand correctly?" Ray asked for confirmation.

"Yes!," came the shout of joy. He grabbed both his friends and gave a hearty embrace.

He let go and with fire in his eyes asked, "Oh my God, oh my God, what am I going to do?"

Sophia and Ray didn't respond. They wanted emotions to settle before any strategy was approached. Vintage started pacing and rubbing his hands together. It was the most anxious they had ever seen him.

"I've got to speak with Luz first," he decided.

Sophia took a deep breath and sobbed, "Yeah, that's what I'd do if I were you."

Ray grabbed Vintage on the shoulder and looked him in the eye.

"You're going back. I can tell. Is that right?"

Vintage nodded and with great conviction in his voice affirmed, "I have to. All things considered, I have to."

"To what end?" Ray pushed as he gulped back his emotions.

"Multiple ends, I imagine, but one is certain at the moment. I must see my family. As to other objectives, I'm not sure yet. After I talk to Luz, I'd like to speak

with the whole crew-- Jovius, Tai, everyone. I'm going to need advice and support, but first thing's first. I must see Luz at once."

He rushed out to his silver 'mini-beast' to take off for Mari's place. Ray and Sophia followed him out and they wished him luck. He jumped in and took off through the sky. No time to drive, sometimes you had to fly. This most definitely was one of those times.

His flight pod raced nearly as fast as his mind. How was he going to break this to Luz? They loved each other and he was actually thinking to take the next step and move in together, then this happened. It was more than complicated, it was a complete clusterfuck.

"Control your emotions," he thought to himself. "Easier said than done."

A tear rolled down his cheek. His mind moved to the boy, 2001, his son. What would he be like? Would his son remember him? How would his wife feel? He tried to remember the circumstances of his departure. Did she know where he was? What he was doing? Wait, why had he left? He puzzled and strained to remember. Some things were still foggy.

"Ah, yes! I volunteered! Volunteered? Why would I volunteer to leave my family?"

He breathed heavy as memories rushed back. Simultaneously, he pushed the mini-beast's accelerator to the max and cut through the soggy mist in the air. Weather be damned, I'm on a mission.

Wait... Volunteered for what? A mission... A vague mission, to save the Free State... Mission to the other side of the world. First time in the history of the nation! More importantly, his family would be well taken care of. That's why he volunteered. He was offered riches. He had to take care of his family. This was the best way. No more struggling with finances. His family deserved better.

"But wait!" he struggled to recollect, "How did he cross the wall? Flight didn't exist in his world. Come on, think, think... A pilot. A pilot? Must have been from Luz's side of the world. Couldn't have been a Free Stater, or could it? Don't remember actual flight, only being told plan by my trainer. Who was my trainer? A woman, attractive woman, and a cold-looking crusty old man. Who was he? Who was she? Why don't I remember the flight? Maybe drugged before flight. Why do I remember pilot? I got on craft with pilot, then everything is blank. Next memory is waking up, looking at Ray and Sophia. Big blank spot in between... Psychological tests... Yes, too many tests to count, I remember. They chose me, must have passed." He banked hard to the right to avoid a quickly approaching lightning storm. Bad weather to fly in. Oh well.

He landed his pod a couple hours later and ran out into a downpour. He ran to the front door and banged as if his life depended on it. Luz opened the door and gasped,

"You're soaked! Come in, come in! What a surprise!" She kissed him on the cheek and told him to wait. She'd grab some towels and fresh clothes for him.

The place was quiet. Mari was sitting in her usual spot by the fire. She smiled and waved. She looked sleepy. Luz came back and gave a stack of fresh fabric to her man.

"Everyone's napping, one of those days, ya know?"

She had no idea, and he definitely didn't feel like sleeping.

"I'll get changed and then we can talk, ok?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Yep. I'm puzzled about the surprise visit, especially in weather like this. Everything ok?"

He did a terrible job of hiding his motley blend of emotions, attempted to smile, and turned out to be a creepy grimace.

"Maybe we can talk in your room?" he asked.

She agreed and he went off to get changed.

He came into her bedroom and found her leaning back on one elbow on the bed. Her hair hung gently over her soft shoulders. She was too beautiful to describe.

"Why didn't you wear your waterproof stuff, or at least some smart clothes?"

"I didn't have time. Let me explain," he responded as he sat next to her on the bed and hunched over a bit.

The look on his face gave her concern. She promptly sat up next to him and took his hand.

First, he relayed everything that had happened over the past few days. The headaches, the implants, the brush with death. She interrupted his monologue with a good fist on the shoulder.

"And you're just now telling me?" she screamed in disbelief and despair. Her face drooped and she began to sob deeply.

"I should have told you, or Ray or Sophia should have, but it all happened so fast. I'm sorry. Please, let me continue. I've regained my memories. That is what I really need to talk to you about." She perked up a hair at the good news.

"You remember? That's great!"

He shrugged and looked away from her.

"In some ways yes, in other ways no. I won't mince words. Do you remember the woman and child from my dreams?"

"Of course, I remember you telling me about those dreams. They happened infrequently and always made you upset."

"Yes, and for good reason. The woman, I now remember, is my wife, and the boy is my son."

He paused and waited for her reaction. She looked away from him and started sulking uncontrollably.

"I'm so sorry, Luz, I didn't know, you know that," he pleaded.

She gulped air and wiped her tears as she continued facing the wall.

"Please, Luz, look at me. I need to look at you."

She turned slowly and faced the man she loved and was now, in her mind, sure to lose. They got lost in each other's eyes for a moment.

"So what now?" came her soft reply.

He sobbed and with cracked voice said, "I have to go, I think you know that. I don't know for how long, or what will happen, but I have to at least try, and for maybe more than just personal reasons."

She tried her best to compose herself and asked, "What are you getting at? What other reasons? Just be honest, please, I deserve that much."

He nodded in agreement.

"I'd like to meet with you and my closest friends, the whole crew. I need everyone's thoughts."

She didn't ask any more questions. She decided she knew enough for now.

## Chapter 45

The next day some sun broke through and destroyed the gloom, at least superficially. The emotions of Vintage and Luz were still in dark disarray. They were zooming back to Ray and Sophia's place. Arrangements had been made for Jovius and Tai to meet them there. They didn't talk much on the way. They were both uncertain as to their future and the mood was palpably gray.

When they arrived, the whole crew was waiting for them. All were sipping coffee and chatting at the dining table. Before saying anything, Jovius rose and gave his chum a huge bear hug. Everyone waited for Vintage to speak. Nobody knew what to say, awkward for everyone.

Vintage and Luz took seats at the table next to each other. Vintage looked around at his friends and began, "I assume that Jovius and Tai have been filled in on the recent happenings with me."

Sophia and Ray nodded.

"Very well, I need advice and opinions from you all. I have some life changing decisions to make and don't want to go it alone. The first thing I'd like to address is the implants which were removed from my head and the implications they bring forth. Before doing so, I must go ahead and let you all in on some memories I have recovered in the past twenty-four hours. I apparently came here by choice, on a top secret mission to gather intelligence regarding technology and resources on this side of the world. The purpose of the mission, albeit very vague, was to 'save the Democratic Free State'. It seems logical to deduct that gathering such information would make possible, at best, copying of technology by my government back home, and at worst, it could mean that an invasion is in the works at some point in the future. I imagine such an invasion would be to capture resources from this side. It seems to be the most logical reason for such an invasion. As you all know, I was unaware of my spying due to an induced memory blockage. Why my memory was blocked, I can only imagine. I hope that none of you have lost trust in me."

He looked around at his friends with a hopeful look on his face. Nobody spoke to the contrary, so he continued.

"Apparently, due to the poison that was injected into my system upon disabling and removing the spy devices from my head, it becomes quite clear that I was to make a one-way trip only." He paused, looked everyone in the eye, and took a deep breath before continuing.

"Regarding this aspect of my situation, I'll tell you what I'd like to do. I wish to return to the Democratic Free State. I'll get to the personal reasons later, but for now will only give my thoughts on other, wider ranging matters. If I find things suitable to stay an extended period and think that I have a shot at starting a revolution of the mind, then I will stay an unknown period of time and will do my best to help people learn Natural Law, not just for the good of my people back home, but to diffuse as much of an invasion force which might be assembled. If I find a small number willing to learn and change, but not enough to make substantial changes overall, I might find it necessary to bring those who wish to escape to this side of the world. However, as you all know, this

is only possible with the technology which you possess. I'd like your thoughts and recommendations. Am I crazy?"

Everyone laughed nervously. Jovius spoke first.

"You're not crazy, my friend. You used to be crazy, but now you're about as wise as anyone from this side. Speaking for myself, if you're asking for some tools and toys to take back with you, I'm all for it and will do anything I can to make it happen."

"Ditto," Ray and Sophia echoed each other.

"Count me in," Tai gladly accepted.

Attention was turned to Luz. She snapped and started bawling. Sophia jumped up and escorted her out to the patio, "Come on, sweetie. We'll get some fresh air."

"Before we get down to technical details of your ambitious mission, while the ladies are away, what are you going to do about your wife and child back home?" Ray questioned in a low voice to safeguard against that superhuman hearing that women possess from catching a word.

Vintage rested his face on his hands, "That's the wild-card in all this, from my point of view, anyway. If she takes me back and I can settle in with my family again, then I'll have a decision to make. Do I stay and try to have a revolution? Will my wife be open to that? What about our child? What will I do for work? Another option would be to bring my family back to this side and that would be it. We'd never go back. If she hates my guts and wants nothing to do with me, what then? Do I stay and try to make a living while revolutionizing whoever I can? Or should I just come back and make a life here? I won't know until I confront my personal life. It's really up in the air."

Ray jumped in, "Regarding your revolutionary fervor, any change that big won't happen just in your lifetime. It took generations of gradual change over here, and I don't know how it would be any different where you're going. The fact is they're still humans under deep mind control. Another question that comes to mind, is how would you work undetected? You've told us about the surveillance they have."

"But," Tai interrupted, "What you have in your favor is that whoever sent you here won't be expecting you. They think you're dead, remember?"

Jovius took his turn, "Another advantage you have will be the technology you bring back with you. You'll have more than a few tricks up your sleeve, we'll make sure of that."

Vintage showed optimism on his face, "True, very true. However, they've been watching and gathering for how long now? I've been here a couple of years, and with all I've seen, they've got a huge load of data."

"True," Ray conceded, "But data means nothing unless you know how to use it. They might get some lower-end products finished relatively quickly, but it'll take years, I imagine, to make anything even remotely advanced."

"Agreed," Jovius interjected, "And as far as any invasion is concerned, it would be an unspeakable tragedy. They wouldn't stand a chance. People over here could run circles around them with our eyes practically closed, and not just because of superior technology. We also know the lay of the land, and last, but not least, we have no central command. This makes for a more fluid fighting force when necessary because smaller groups and individuals can make decisions faster than big behemoth organizations can. They spend all day with red tape while we get things done. Period. So, as horrific as it

would be to have to slaughter any invading force, I'm definitely not worried about them taking over this side under central command."

Tai and Ray agreed wholeheartedly.

The ladies came back to the table at this point. Both looked weary, but Luz was much better than before.

"Another issue I'd like to address is that of finding who tampered with my memories and tried to kill me. I don't remember being told it was a suicide mission, or I never would have taken part, no matter the financial promise to my family. Thoughts on seeking them out?"

"Don't," Luz said emphatically, which surprised everyone at the table. "What do you mean to do, get revenge?"

Vintage shrugged and said, "It had crossed my mind."

Ray shook his head emphatically, "If you really want revenge, then hit 'em where it really hurts. Not personally."

Astonished, Vintage asked for elaboration.

"Because," Ray continued, "Number one, they don't know you're alive. Once you blow your cover, all bets are off. Number two, if you really want to get at them, diffuse their plans. That would be best for everyone concerned, anyway. No invasion. Possible freedom for a greater number of people. Basically, throw a wrench in their machine."

"Good thinking, Ray. You interested in coming with?" Vintage asked half-joking.

"Don't even think about it!" Sophia shouted, obviously appalled at the notion.

"Just kidding, this is a solo mission, with one exception," Vintage spoke showing teeth and eyes bright. "I need a lift over, can't exactly go running around that side of the wall in my pod. Volunteers to chauffeur?"

"I'll do it," Tai jumped immediately. "They'll never see us, not with my disappearing act."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Vintage breathed a sigh of relief.

"Above all else," began Jovius, "What you're planning to undertake requires one thing. Do you know what that thing is, after all you've learned here?"

Without hesitation, Vintage knew what Jovius was referring to.

"It requires will power," Vintage spoke deeply.

Jovius asked, "Do you have the will?"

Vintage spoke proudly, "I absolutely have the will."

Jovius raised his arms and loudly proclaimed, "Well, then, I say we dub thee Will, first free mind of the so-called Democratic Free State! All those in favor, speak your kind words of accordance!"

Ray stood and with powerful voice said, "To Will, formerly known as Vintage, I wish you the best!"

Sophia followed suit, "To Will!"

Everyone stood and in unison shouted, "To Will!"

## Chapter 46

"We're getting our asses kicked, General Tool. We've got operational flying machines, don't we? Can you explain to me why the hell we're not using them?" President Tyran yelled as he banged his fist like a child. The walrus-like general felt like squashing this strung-out pipsqueak, but thought better of it. Too many political ramifications. He never ceased to be amazed at how terrible a strategist his boss truly was. How to explain tactics to an imbecile?

"With all due respect sir, I think you're blowing things out of proportion. Our losses have been minimal and we are holding strong in most border areas. If you..."

"The only thing out of proportion is your waistline, general!" Tyran interrupted as he pompously fluffed out the collar of his blue leisure suit. "Minimal losses? You have a strange definition of minimal, that's for sure. How many tanks have we lost? How many boats?"

General Tool folded his puffy hands over his keg shaped paunch, "We have lost a considerable number of soldiers, but the equip..."

Tyran shook his fist in the air and interrupted again, "I don't give a damn about the soldiers! Hell, we can always coax more dupes into dying, but machines cost money! If this keeps up, we'll lose what we gained from the last war, and that's not gonna happen on my watch. So you'd better have a damn good reason for not using those flying machines, general!"

General Tool involuntarily flushed red with a lake of blood to his mammoth head and responded as calmly as he could muster.

"If we use our secret weapon now, it will show our hand. Remember that the development of this technology is to be kept secret from Creedy and the higher-ups. They, no doubt, have developed powerful machines as well and could jeopardize our aspirations if we act too soon. Not to mention the fact that test flights have proven to be unreliable, at best. Not only that, but it takes time to train pilots. I urge caution at this point, please sir."

Tyran stared unflinchingly at the General's saggy eyes. He licked his lips and took an intricate crystal bottle from the table next to him. He poured himself a generous shot of whiskey. The general sagged a bit further but made no comment. Tyran sloshed it down vigorously and then spoke.

"Damnit, Tool, you make some good points, I must admit."

The general turned smug and straightened his cap.

"However," the president continued, "We could have the upper hand right now, and if we wait, we could lose the advantage." Tool began to object but Tyran didn't let him. "It's a gamble, I know, but if we don't act now, we might lose our golden opportunity. What if we're the only ones with flight capability? We could conquer both regions before they knew what hit em!"

General Tool kept a poker face as best he could, despite the obvious megalomania which had sprung forward from this detestable creature before him.

"With this in mind, General Tool, I order a counter-attack by air immediately on strategic points within the Divine Nation. Hit them in the heart and the head, and the rest will fall. We act now!"

General Tool said nothing in return, but nodded reluctantly and made his way to the exit. Perhaps, he thought, it would be his final meeting with President Tyran Max, or perhaps one of his final meetings, period. His job was to follow orders, though, and this was what he intended to do, like it or not.

## Chapter 47

2001 had his eyes glued to the TV as his mom had an unfocused stare out the window. The TV blared with Tyran Max's voice, "Help those less fortunate today. I urge you to give to the Max Food Foundation. Help us help others." 0777 sighed deeply.

"What's wrong, mom?" her concerned son asked.

"Nothing, why do you ask?" she responded in a dry tone. He squinted and shook his finger at her.

"You're not very good at telling lies, ya know." She sighed and ran her hand gently through her son's hair.

"You got me there. Hey, it's a nice day out, how about we go to the park?"

He looked at her suspiciously, "Are you trying to change the subject?" he pushed.

She couldn't help but giggle at her son's persistence. "Should I tell him?" she thought. No, it was too early, and too complicated. He had every right to know about what she knew of his father, but she thought it best to wait. Who knows? Maybe he would even come back. She was holding out hope.

"Come on, go get your shoes on. We're going."

A while later they were in Liberty Park. It was quite the site, full of amusements and distractions. It also had an abundance of greenery, which stood in stark contrast to the gray and mechanized features of most of the city. 0777 happily pushed student 2001 on a swing. A hummingbird whizzed by as the boy swung upwards.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed with childlike wonder, "Did you see that, mom?"

"I sure did, one of the prettiest birds around," she said as she stopped pushing to admire the colorful surprise.

"Do you think one day we'll be able to fly?" he asked in a serious tone. Her work being top secret, she decided to give a vague answer.

"I suppose it could happen one day. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I dunno, Mom. I just think it would be so awesome, ya know? Fly like a bird, or maybe an angel. What flies faster, a bird or an angel, do you know?"

She chuckled at her son's voracious appetite for knowledge. He was truly rare. Not many children asked so many questions like him. Questions were dealt with severely at school so it didn't take long to break most of the habit. Her son was extremely smart, though. He knew when to ask and when to keep quiet.

"I think angels fly faster, without a doubt," she assured him.

"Mom, why are people from the Divine Nation attacking our country?" he asked innocently.

"The same reason all wars happen, son. People get scared and angry and when someone tells them to fight, they fight."

His face twisted, "That doesn't make any sense, Mom."

"Sometimes people don't make sense," she agreed.

"I don't ever want to fight," he assured her.

"I sure hope you stay that way, son. I hope with all my heart."

"Look mom! Look at those birds!" 2001 yelled with delight. Far off in the distance there were what appeared to be giant black birds flying to the east. Upon closer

inspection, however, 0777 recognized what they really were. They were most definitely not birds. They were one of the projects she had been working on. In reality, they were clumsy, bulky excuses for aircraft, but they were flying, at the moment. They were more or less boxy tanks floating clumsily through the air. Bombs and missiles hadn't been developed yet by the DFS, so there were three giant guns and grenade launchers stationed around the perimeter and on the top. She cringed as she knew that she had helped create those flying monsters. She looked at her son then back up at the sky. The "birds" disappeared behind some low clouds.

"Come on, son. Let's go home."

Whatever was happening with the "black birds", she didn't know, but she definitely didn't want to be outside.

## Chapter 48

An emergency meeting of High Priest Hellius' military advisers had convened in a bunker just below his central palace. Most of the top military brass was present at the meeting. General Israel al-Isis was standing in front of a wall map of the Divine Nation. He coolly pointed to a dot on the map and explained the recent happenings,

"Peace Mountain army base came under attack from the DFS less than two hours ago. Reports have come in of heavy casualties and severe damage to equipment. The DFS has now taken control. The most striking aspect of the attack was the technology used. Apparently, upwards of ten flying machines led the way for a convoy of ground troops." A collective gasp filled the room and chatter erupted.

"Flying machines!" Hellius yelled, incredulous. This quickly silenced the chatter.  
"General al-Isis, have these reports been verified?"

"Yes, sir."

"Recommendations, General?" Hellius asked, knowing full well what would be offered from his icy military man.

"I believe our best option is to use an experimental technology to disable their craft." This began the murmuring amongst the brass once again.

"Do you feel that we are ready to use such early designs, General? Are they operational?" Hellius prodded, enjoying every minute.

The general stood straight as a board and confirmed, "Tests have shown the effectiveness of our new shooting technology to be well above fifty percent, on average. Recommend we target enemy aircraft immediately before we sustain further losses."

One thin-haired colonel raised his voice and demanded, "What in the hell are you referring to, General? Why wasn't I aware of any of this?"

Hellius smiled widely and answered, "That was on a need to know basis, and now that you need to know, you know, is that clear?"

"Clear as mud," the colonel muttered, not happy to be out of the loop.

"Permission to proceed, sir?" the general asked anxiously.

"Yes, one-hundred percent, please do."

The colonel raised his voice again, "Now wait a minute! We need some details!"

"Please, all in good time, Colonel, all in good time. For now, General al-Isis will handle all the details. He has my full faith and confidence. Meeting adjourned. Except for you, General. I need a word with you in private."

The brass grumbled and filed out leaving the top two alone.

Hellius sat up and turned more serious than before.

"General, things are obviously moving much quicker than we had anticipated. After we shoot down their aircraft, we won't waste any time. The secret is out and the signal from across the wall, as you know, went dark. It's time to act. I want a full-scale air invasion of the DFS. Once we have control of their territory, we'll be in a remarkable position. The Royal Region, so far as we know, doesn't have access to the information and technology we have. Soon, my good man, we will strike the world stage like nothing before in history. The time is ours."

The general nodded and smiled, "A pleasure to work with you, sir."  
 Chapter 49

The media was full of war propaganda.

"God's Guns Shoot Down Flying Demons" ran one headline.

"God's Guns Overpower Infidel Invaders," was another.

Everyone was talking about it. The world was changing fast, and everyone knew it. There had been wars before, but this was different, at least that's what the media said.

"Divine Inspiration of Scientists Leads Nation On Crusade," was another frightful propaganda piece.

"The world will yield to God's will," Hellius spoke to the cameras in front of his central palace in the capital city.

"The time has come! He has given us the means to defeat our enemies. Stand with us!" he yelled furiously to the crowd in his gleaming white robes.

It wasn't a perfect victory, but the invading 'flying demons' had been shot down and captured. It was now time to go on the offensive. The pilots were inexperienced, only having had a little over a month of training, most of which was on a flight simulator. However, the sheer number of craft which had been produced over the past few months was quite impressive. That's what happens when a breakthrough gets full funding and attention. Over one hundred sleek-looking jets were now in the sacred arsenal, and Hellius was sending everything he had over the border. Who knew, maybe the DFS had more tricks up their sleeve, but he didn't want to wait and find out.

9003 sat peacefully on the sofa with her son. It was an artificial peace, a total illusion. 9003 was taking her medication again. She was in a comfortable fog. Her son, on the other hand, was not. He sat anxiously watching the television set. There was nonstop news of the great victory against the 'flying demons of the infidels'. Video clips from a multitude of angles were shown repeatedly as the fantastic new weaponry was put on display. Incredible exploding projectiles were fired from golden cannons from the ground to the sky and triumphantly knocked the dark demons down in a blaze of glory. The boy watched with wide eyes then turned to his mother whose eyes were mere slits as she sagged in the sofa. He shook her eagerly.

"Mom, mom look! The DFS has mechanical birds!"

She yawned and smiled at her boy, "That's nice, dear."

He continued to shake her and demanded, "But mom, you didn't even look!"

She obliged and was instantly jolted by the otherworldly sight.

"Oh my God!" she shrieked.

"Do you think the men in the mechanical birds are dead, mom?" he asked with concern on his baby face.

The war had come home again. Her haze of comfort was officially ruined. "How long did I sleep?" she wondered. It was as if she had woken up in another time and place—similar, yet strikingly different.

"I imagine, if there were men in those birds, then they didn't survive."

The boy looked back at the TV. There were graphic images of badly wounded DFS prisoners being carried off proudly by Divine soldiers.

"Mom, I want to fly one of those birds. Can I?" he pleaded with good nature.

"Not today, son. Looks like it's a bad day to fly."

"Why are they killing each other?"

"Didn't they teach you in school not to ask questions, son?"

"Yeah, but I can ask you, right?"

She smiled and rubbed his back, "Of course you can, my love. I have a question for you, actually. How did you manage to get out of the rehab center if you ask so many questions?"

He hesitated thoughtfully, then answered confidently, "I just told them the answers they wanted to hear."

She was proud of her son. He had a mind of his own, which was nearly impossible in their mechanized, standardized society.

"You didn't like it there, huh?"

"No, my regular school is lots better, and I get to see you once a month now, and I don't have to take the pills. All I had to do was say what they wanted to hear, and I got all that in return. Pretty smart, huh, mom?" he announced proudly with a puffy little chest.

She smiled, "You are so very smart, son. Maybe you will fly one of those birds, after all."

## Chapter 50

The Golden Mason Hotel was the most exclusive in the world. It catered only to the upper-echelons of society and this day in particular even more so. Only essential staff had been kept on duty and they were only allowed to traverse the bottom two floors. No guests outside of the special entourage were permitted entrance, and private security was swarming on many levels. Only the private staff of the top oligarchs were allowed entrance to the top level suite, and this was only when they were called up by intercom.

In the suite itself sat the power players once again, the oligarchy who made kings, raised and crashed economies, and used the masses as swarms of pawns. Mason Black, the Rockateller Brothers, the Rothsman Brothers, Galvin Creedy, and Barack Bush were having an emergency meeting. They were seated on scattered red and blue velvet antique chairs and sofas around the main social area of the suite, which covered the entire 101<sup>st</sup> floor. The events of the past twenty-four hours required immediate attention. Things were not going quite according to plan, and decisions had to be made in a hurry.

Mason Black sat in the center of attention and sipped on a drink which cost more than most people's monthly salary. He looked around the room at his associates. He made it a point to not look at them suspiciously and forced himself to restrain his anger. Damn near all backstabbers, is what they were, and he was receiving the brunt of the punishment. He could play the game, though. The situation was now much more complicated, though, and he dreaded the extra toil he was being forced into. Nevertheless, he would do anything necessary to stay on top.

"Let me formally welcome you gentlemen, and thank you for coming on such short notice. I imagine that most of you have an idea of why I've called this meeting, but to be sure, I'll tell you straight out. Actually, I'll tell you the heart of the matter by asking two questions. Number one, why does the Democratic Free State have flying machines? Secondly, why does the Divine Nation have anti-flight guns?"

He paused, stiffened his jaw, and glanced around the room. Nobody flinched, as expected. They didn't get to their positions of power by being easily rattled, either. Creedy and the Rockatellers shared similar thoughts but kept up the poker face appearance.

"Does Mason know about our leaking info to and financing Hellius? Is he trying to toy with us if he does?"

Much the same was crossing Barack Bush's mind. Always the most brash of the group, the royal smoothed his hair back and decided to play the game.

"It might be plausible that the signal was intercepted somehow, or, you never know. There could have been someone in the research facilities who decided to make a move and cash in on their secrets. It's damn near impossible to find good help these days, ya know?"

Mason smirked at Backstabber Bush and said ironically, "I couldn't agree more that it's hard to find good help. You just never know who you can trust these days." He paused for effect. "Outside of our circle, of course. Regarding the intercept, I suppose it isn't impossible and cannot be ruled out. Very astute of you, Barack."

He peered slowly around and made eye contact with everyone.

"That still doesn't answer the question of financing. I've noticed some discrepancies in funding in the Divine Nation. All the numbers seem to be way out of line with normal wartime investments. Anyone care to comment?"

John Rockateller decided to jump in this time.

"It stands to reason, does it not, that in either scenario in which the information was stolen or leaked, that it would also be reasonable to assume that money could be moved with some type of electronic malfeasance?"

Mason Black didn't waste any time with his response, "If that's the case, John, then why were you not aware of it and why has it not been fixed?"

John wasn't quite ready for that but kept up the act as best he could.

"As you know, Mason, I depend on my subordinates just as much as you do. I'll do some serious investigating and will clean house if necessary, I can assure you."

Mason nodded slowly as he gave a cold stare at his cunning subordinate.

"Yes, that sounds most helpful. I look forward to what you find."

Creedy decided to say something so as not to look suspicious with a zipped lip,

"Perhaps a word with Zee or Mr. Gray might yield some useful information."

Mr. Black slammed his fist on the coffee table in front of him and spoke with dark conviction, "Thank you for gracing us with your wise insight. I've already spoken with both, Mr. Creedy. I thought I'd save you the trouble."

Creedy stared blankly at his heated boss.

Mason went on to other, more pressing, business.

"So now the question is, how do we handle the new dynamics of this situation. Obviously, we are nowhere near ready to invade the other side of the globe as we don't have the ability to escape the atmosphere, as of yet. We also don't have the ability yet, as far as I know, of cutting a hole through that damned wall. And now we have two tyrants battling it out with technology which I did not authorize, and as far as I know, none of us authorized, to be given to either one. So what's our next move, gentlemen?"

The Rothsman Brothers made a case for cutting funding drastically to both sides involved. Lord Bush recommended assassinating the top leadership of both. This would lead to a power vacuum which would occupy both nations internally and throw their technological development off kilter for the foreseeable future. The Rockatellers thought it would be a good idea to have the Royal Region join the conflict. They argued that such a move might draw the war out longer and not allow for a clear victory on either side.

Mr. Black listened to his associates intently, but in reality, he already knew what the next move was. He was always a step ahead, even of his most trusted allies. In a game as big as this, Mr. Black felt it better to not trust anyone, at least not completely. When things quieted down, all focused on the stern Mason for his thoughts, and ultimately, his decision. Half the people in the room were just hoping that he wasn't onto their underhanded dealings behind his back and that they would live to see morning.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Very insightful, all of you, with the exception of you, Galvin. Would you please enlighten us with your outlook?" Mr. Black asked smugly.

Creedy pursed his lips and stiffened his jaw, "I must concur with the Rockateller boys. I think compounding the conflict would buy us the time we need."

Mason gave a sinister look of feigned sympathy to Mr. Creedy.

"You agree with the Rockatellers, I see. Could you explain to me, Galvin, why you're on my payroll again?"

Creedy didn't blink and certainly didn't want to talk. He was in a no-win situation, and he knew it.

Black continued, "Although I think all of you make valid points and that any one of those maneuvers could be successful, I must reject all of them. Before I explain the plan of action, I must call another related matter to attention. As everyone here knows, there have been some differences of opinion as to how to go about our invasion across the wall when the time is right. There are some who feel it would be best to merge the three regions into one, under one puppet ruler, which would seem to be more practical on its surface. There are others who feel that such a move might put too much power in the hands of one ruler, albeit a puppet. Sometimes puppets can get ambitious and out of line, I'll admit. Those who see it this way think that keeping three regions as the status quo and having separate invasions across the wall would better suit our objectives. However, we must consider what will be faced across that wall. They will still possess superior technology, to be sure, and they will also be defending their home turf. This puts us at a disadvantage. Due to the current circumstances, I am forced to make the decision that a unified front will now be the best option."

He paused a bit and took the last sip of his pricey booze. Eyebrows raised, but everyone kept silent.

He continued methodically, "Rather than being able to choose the leader of the unified front, I now feel our best option is to do nothing and see what happens. If Tyran wins, so be it. If Hellius is victorious, all the same. The main purpose of this is to make them show all their cards. It is clear that both have developed advanced technology due to some, let's say, unfortunate incidents."

He couldn't help but glare at Galvin Creedy a bit just for the sake of showmanship. That's one of the psychopathic traits one carries at the top of such a cabal. He looked away from Creedy and continued.

"We will allow them to battle it out and see exactly the type of weaponry at their disposal. Once a victory has been attained and the two regions unified, it will be mere child's play for the victor to conquer the Royal Region. This is, of course, assuming that King Sitan has not been given any secret information like the others. If the royals have yesterday's technology then they will be easily defeated and absorbed into the new hemispherical empire. There is no reason to think that Sitan has any secret weapons, now is there?"

There was a chilled silence, which was abruptly broken by Barack Bush, "Not unless you count that damn cat of his!" he smirked. Even Mason Black had to laugh at that absurdity before he went on.

"Once the dust has settled, and the unified front is established, we will set in motion a program of semi-integration, culturally and socially. We will keep the banks and corporate order as it stands now in order to keep the appearance of economic competition. We will leave it to Mr. Hissinger, Mr. Gray, and Mr. Bernays to set up the machinery for integration. Do I hear any objections?"

Palpable silence filled the room. By their silence they acquiesced.

Mason looked around the room slowly, making eye contact with each one individually. His face slipped into a slanted grin and announced, "Very well, gentlemen. I'm glad we had this little talk. Please keep me up to date on any new happenings which you feel should be brought to my attention. Meeting adjourned."

All filed out and went their separate ways, except for Mason Black. He had one more piece of business to attend to. He pulled out his mobile phone and placed the call he had anticipated would be necessary. He spoke with dark amusement into the phone as he gazed out at the cityscape below.

"Proceed, Mr. Hissinger."

"Yes, sir," came the response from the deep crusty voice on the other end.

## Chapter 51

The crew was gathered at Ray and Sophia's for the big day. It was filled with so many contrasting emotions. Sadness, hope, joy, anxiety, courage, excitement, uncertainty and, above all, love. All were going to miss their friend, and they also wished him the best with whatever he endeavored to do. At the same time, everyone was uncertain as to whether they would ever see him again.

Most overcome with emotion was Luz. She was losing the man she loved. She knew, deep down in her heart, that he had to do it. She understood, from a logical point of view, why it must be so. However, her own personal feelings were stronger, and she was filled with too much grief at the loss. She might never see him again, and if she did, under what circumstances?

Jovius was going to miss his friend very much, but he was also hopeful that he was witnessing the beginning of a great change in the world. Perhaps this would be the catalyzing moment which would unite the world in peace under Natural Law. He was also going to miss doing live shows with this 'stranger from the other side'. Having comical dialogue about the absurdities of the state, authority, and money had made their act the most popular anywhere. Now he would have to fly solo.

Ray and Sophia also were feeling a mixed bag. Ray was feeling some pride in addition to his sadness. He was proud that his friend had come so far in his awakening to truth in such a short time. Sophia felt like she was losing a brother. As for the newly dubbed Will (formerly Vintage and formerly Writer 2001) himself, he failed to fight back the tears. Here he was, losing so much, and possibly gaining so much. Everything was in flux again, only this time he was fully conscious of the changes taking place. It was a crossroads that everyone comes to in life, but in the case of Will, it was an extreme case.

They were all standing around Tai's stealth machine. He had volunteered to bring Will over the wall, and all thought it was best, from a security perspective. Since new technology was surely in the hands of some in Will's former nation, all felt it was best to take precaution, and Tai's ship was the best equipped for the task.

Jovius was the first to say goodbye. He gave Will a bear hug and then clasped his hands around his face.

"I wish you the best. Use your will and you can overcome anything. Stay strong, my friend." Will nodded as a tear slowly streaked down his cheek.

Sophia gave Will a warm hug as well and jokingly said to Ray, "Our baby is all grown up!"

Ray stepped up next and shook Will's hand with a hearty grip, "And to think she was afraid of you on the first day."

This provoked a nervous laugh from Will who replied with shock, "You were afraid of me? You were wearing invisible armor, I was passed out, and you were afraid?"

Sophia laughed as she wept, "Not my most rational moment, for sure."

Luz was the final one to send him off to the known unknown. The anguish on her face was impossible to hide, although she tried her best.

"I don't know what to say," she began.

Will shook his head and grabbed her by the hands. Standing face to face and with eyes locked together he said, "I don't, either. How about, 'until next time'?" She thought there would never be a next time, but she held out faint hope that it was possible.

"Very well," she agreed, "until next time. I love you, Will."

He kissed her softly on her tearful cheek and said, "I love you, too."

He slowly took one step back, forced a half-smile, and turned to Tai and the ship.

"We'll say our goodbyes on the other side, how about that?" Tai suggested with a face full of content and focus, but also mixed with sadness.

Will and Tai went up into the craft and closed the silver colored hatch. Tai took the controls and began the ignition sequence while Will got strapped in behind him.

"Do you remember how to do this?" Tai asked ironically, trying to lighten the mood and referring to their trip to the moon.

"Yeah," Will managed a smile, "I do nothing and let you handle it."

Tai had what might pass for smug written on his face and said, "You remember the rules of space flight, that's good. Take one last look before we get going."

Will turned to a small window on his left and saw his friends waving madly at them. Will and Tai waved goodbye and Tai activated the invisibility controls. The ship methodically began to disappear, section by section, in front of everyone's eyes and with it, their friend also faded away.

The ship took off vertically with uncanny silence and once it was above tree level, it started to ascend quickly towards the stratosphere.

"Computer, activate life pods," Tai ordered. Two invisible and elastic bubbles wrapped themselves seamlessly around the two occupants to provide the necessary protection from the elements of space.

"Look in the compartment to your right," Tai said.

Will did so and was surprised to find a bag of high-tech goodies. He leaned forward to speak near Tai, "What's this all about?"

"Just a little going away gift from everyone. I'm sure they'll all come in handy," Tai smiled gallantly.

Will picked through the bag of techno-tools and toys.

"Don't worry," Tai continued, "You've seen or used most of them before. We wouldn't want you having any accidents, ya know?"

"Thanks, that's very reassuring," Will sighed.

They broke through Earth's atmosphere and quickly reached the top of the wall. They cruised smoothly up and over and then immediately started the descent towards Will's former home.

Tai tilted his head and asked, "Where am I dropping you at?"

"You need me to give you directions?" a shocked voice answered.

This caught Tai off guard. "It's not like I know where you need to go, where your house is, or whatever. You mean you don't know?"

Will thought for a moment. "I guess we'll have to eyeball it. Once we get near familiar territory, I'll be able to give you some input."

Tai shrugged and smiled. "Looks like we're taking the scenic route."

A few minutes later they were cruising at a low altitude over a vast, barren desert.

"We're in the Divine Nation, no doubt. Fly west and we should reach the DFS within a couple of hours."

Tai thought for a moment and then suggested, "I'll use my external cameras to show what's ahead. Maybe five hundred miles, will that work? Then you can give me better instructions."

Will agreed that this would be their best chance of pinpointing where they needed to go. As they neared the border of the Divine Nation and the Democratic Free State, the desert gave way to a spectacle that both men had never seen. Off in the distance, there appeared dozens of aircraft attacking a military installation.

"Looks like they made quick work of the intel they stole with their little spy game," Tai said as he shook his head in despair.

Will got a guilty look on his face. Seeing this, Tai tried to console him.

"Don't worry about it, it wasn't your fault. You didn't know."

"I still played my role," Will said as he looked at the scene in horror.

"I'll pull around all this mess. We don't want to get too close. Lots of traffic."

The attack by the Divine Aircraft was merciless. The craft easily and swiftly swooped down into the army base of the DFS and was mowing down all people in its path. The DFS base had no air defense capabilities at that time, so it was a ripe target. Both men looked away in horror as they banked away from the ruthless destruction.

"Those craft have the flag of the Divine Nation!" Will shrieked.

Not familiar with the divisions and politics of that strange half-planet, Tai inquired, "So what does that mean, exactly? I'm not clear."

Will sobbed and replied, "Well, it looks like they're invading my home nation, the DFS!"

Tai became somber and said, "I'm sorry to hear that. It looks like things have changed so much since you left, huh?"

"More than I could have imagined," Will lamented.

They reached the capitol city of DFS a couple hours later. As they approached, the presidential mansion became visible, which made the remainder of the directions a piece of cake. He remembered it well.

"I can tell you where I want to go, but I'm not sure where you'll be able to land," Will said.

"Where is that?" Tai asked.

"I know where my house is, but it's not like there's a landing strip there, ya know?" Will said with chagrin.

"Are there any large, open spaces nearby?" Tai asked.

A hopeful jolt surged through Will, "Of course! Liberty Park! You can find plenty of space there to land!"

A few minutes later and Tai was gracefully setting his craft down in a soft grassy area of the park. The craft was still invisible, of course. Didn't want to startle the natives.

"Some things haven't changed," Will reminisced. "I used to play with my son at this park. My wife was here, too. Lots of good times here," he continued as he observed the playground nearby. He then took note of a statue monument of Tyran Max.

"Some things haven't changed, for sure," he sighed. "I remember that tyrant's statue."

"Well, Mr. Will," said Tai, "It's been a pleasure. Before I go, one thing you need to know about your goodie bag. There's an encrypted communicator in there which you should be able to use to contact me or anyone in your bon voyage crew. Just dial three. Don't hesitate to call."

Happy to hear this but a bit confused by the uncertainty, he asked, "Should? What do you mean by should?"

Tai shrugged, "It makes peer to peer direct connections, but to be honest, I've never tried it on the other side of the wall before. In theory, it should work, but you never know what type of interference could cause problems."

Will eagerly shook Tai's hand and said, "It's been a pleasure, Tai. Thanks for everything." Will let himself out of the exit hatch and climbed down to the inviting home green.

Tai slowly raised the craft and then suddenly zipped away. It was time for Will to go into action, and the first order of business was to confront his family.

## Chapter 52

0777 sat alone at her dining room table. She was pushing her beans and rice around on her plate. She knew she needed to eat, but she just wasn't in the mood. She felt so alone, it hurt deep down in her soul. She peered over at her favorite photo displayed prominently in the center of the wall to her right. It was of herself with her husband and son. It seemed so long ago!

Her attention was yanked away by the squawking of the television set in the living room. "Must be an emergency announcement," she thought. She knew that the TV had been off, and anytime it started automatically meant a message from the government. They were the only ones with the ability to start a TV from outside someone's home. It was usually some frivolous oddity that President Tyran wanted to flaunt or some obscure new law that was going into effect immediately. It was just loud enough where she could make out most of what was being said.

"DIVINE NATION.....INVASION.....FLYING MACHINES".

What little appetite the slim computer programmer had before left immediately. She darted into the next room. She was horrified to see footage of the attack on the army base near the border with the Divine Nation. It was a full scale slaughter, bodies exploding everywhere, being mowed down like corn in a combine.

The announcer continued coldly reporting the facts in a robotic tone.

"We have now confirmed that the base is under complete control of enemy forces. It is suspected that the enemies of freedom plan to launch a full scale invasion at any moment. Repeat, a full scale invasion may be imminent. President Tyran Max recommends all to stay calm, vigilant, and to remain indoors if possible. Updates will be broadcast as they become available. End Emergency Transmission."

0777's heart and head were both racing. What about her son? He was in school and was to remain there for nearly another month! She started pacing frantically with her hands on her hips and her face ghost white. What could she do? She tried to think rationally.

"Ok, the school is a government facility. It should be well guarded, right?"

She was trying to convince herself of this when there was a loud knock on the front door.

"Who could that be?" she wondered out loud, "I'm not expecting anyone."

She started towards the front door and then stopped dead in her tracks.

"Wait, what if it's soldiers! Oh my God! I was working on that secret tech project, they might be coming for me first!"

She bit her fingernails as she started to sweat and figure out her next move.

"Maybe I'm overreacting," she thought, "I'll just take a quick peek out the peephole and have a look. I'm sure it's nothing."

She tiptoed towards the door and saw the side of a face which stunned her.

"I must be really out of it," she thought, "If I didn't know better, that looks like my husband. Well, at least it's not soldiers. I might as well open up and see what the deal is."

She slowly cracked the door open a tad and asked, "Yes, can I help you?"

"0777," came a familiar tone.

She gasped and opened the door all the way. There he was! After all this time, just shows up at the front door. That was just like him, not to call first. Her eyes bugged out and she clasped her hands to her chest as she tried to catch her breath.

"Oh my, it is you!" she screamed.

Will breathed heavy and his face lit up like a Christmas Tree. She was just as he remembered and just like in his dreams. A river of tears streamed forth from the beautiful young lass and she threw herself into his arms. He held her tightly as he also wept. He felt the warmth of her hair against his cheek and the feeling and heavenly smell brought back more memories rushing through his mind. He kissed her tenderly for a moment that was eternity and a microsecond all wrapped into one. She pulled away, forced a deep breath and said, "Come in, come in," as she wiped her cheeks in a fruitless attempt to dry her face.

Once inside, Will slowly peered around. It looked exactly as he remembered. He remembered! It still gave him chills to have his full cognitive ability back.

"I love what you've done with the place," he said with sheepish irony.

Sniffling and continuing to wipe her face, 0777 laughed. He still had his sense of humor.

They glued eyes once again and she said with quivering lips, "We have so much to talk about. I have so many questions."

He wrapped his arms around her and said, "Yes, yes, an endless ocean of things to speak of, but there is a pressing matter in the present which must be our priority before anything is spoken of the past."

She nodded with a long face. His serious tone worried her.

"My darling, have you heard any news about an invasion by the Divine Nation?" She shivered. How did he know that? She nodded slowly and painfully. He clasped her hands tightly in his as they stood face to face. He regretted that his homecoming was being compromised with such grave circumstances.

"I saw the attack myself and we need to figure out what we're going to do. It appears that they have superior firepower, unless..."

She cut him off, "Wait. What do you mean you saw it?"

"I flew right past it. I'll explain later. Right now I just want to keep you and our son safe. Where is he?"

"He's in school, of course. You've forgotten how things work here, have you?"

She still had a sense of humor, too. Something they shared and complemented about each other, even in hard times. He laughed uncomfortably.

"Of course, I should know. Living in that damn institution having his head filled." They both sighed. "Please, come sit with me, my dear," he said lovingly.

They took a seat on the old beat up sofa and he wrapped his arm around her. She leaned on him and felt his heart beating. They hadn't known this comfort in ages. She wanted it to last forever, but the practical side of her took over.

"What are we going to do if they invade and take over our country? What will they do to us?"

He stopped her. That wasn't going to happen, not on his watch. He didn't come this far to be destroyed by some goon squad.

"We have options," he assured her.

She thought this to be overconfident and preposterous and gave him a look which expressed this in volumes.

"We could run," he suggested in a half-hearted voice. This obviously wasn't what he wanted to do. She gave a doubtful laugh.

"Run where? To the Royal Region? To the moon?"

He pondered her words for a moment and with a mischievous face said, "Sure, we could go to the moon. Maybe not run, but we could get there."

She pulled away from him and looked him up and down. What had they done to him? She was genuinely worried.

"Oh, my, what did they do to you? This is serious! Do you really want to live under the tyrannical rule of High Priest Hellius? I can't bear to imagine the possibilities. I won't imagine such things!" she protested.

He couldn't help but have a hearty chuckle at this and his face wrinkled with delight.

"I wasn't joking, we could go to the moon. Granted, that's not our best option, not in my opinion, anyway."

He noticed her face beginning to turn from worry to scorn.

"Oh, my dear, I've got so much to explain to you, but it will have to wait." He paused and then his eyes lit up with a cocktail of relief and delight.

"Wait, I've got a better idea."

"Better than the moon?" she mocked.

He rose from the sofa and went to retrieve the bag that Tai had given him. He knelt down by the front door where he dropped it and rummaged through until he found the communicator. She peered curiously behind her over the sofa to see what her long-lost husband was up to.

He punched the number three and waited. Hopefully there wouldn't be too much interference. He imagined the shock of them receiving a call so soon. Sure enough, a scratchy voice answered. It was Ray!

"Ray, can you hear me?"

Ray was thrilled to hear Will's voice. "Hey man! Wow, you missed us that much, huh? Just couldn't wait to call?"

Despite the stressful circumstances, Will couldn't help but belly laugh.

"Yeah, I just couldn't wait! Seriously, though, this line is encrypted, right? This is extremely important, Ray."

"Tai and I rigged it ourselves, it's as secure as they come! What's up? Things going ok?"

Will looked over at his wife who was mouthing the words, "Who are you talking to?" He held up a finger to give her pause.

"Well, yes and no. I'm with my wife and she welcomed me home with open arms. There's a slight problem, though. An enemy nation is probably going to launch a full-scale invasion of my country soon. Tai and I saw an air battle, well, battle might be too generous, it was more like a slaughter. It's only a matter of time before they try to take the capital city where we are. So I have some questions about the gift bag that you guys gave me. Anything in there I can use to my advantage?"

Ray responded, "Sure! Lots of things, I'm sure. Are you planning on sticking around there or looking to get away?"

Will desperately wanted to just grab his family, fly away, and never look back. He didn't want to abandon so many people to be slaughtered or placed under even more repressive chains. His conscience wouldn't let him tuck tail and head for the hills.

"I think we'll try and make it work here, at least for the time being, but if things get too unbearable, then I might take a taxi out of here, if you guys don't mind."

"Anytime, you and your family are welcome anytime," Ray assured. "So I imagine you're looking to throw a wrench in their attack machine? That might be the most practical thing to do with the tools you have on hand."

"Ok, I'm putty in your hands. Walk me through, chief," Will said.

"Ok, look in the bag. Do you see a rectangular tablet about eight inches wide? It's half black and half white."

"Yeah, I got it."

"Great. Turn it on on the black side. The machine is a dual signal generator. The black side causes signals which neutralize or shut down machines. Each signal is specifically tailored to specific machines. The white side does the opposite, it can activate dormant machines. Both sides work with biological frequencies, too, by the way. Anyway, you said you encountered a fleet of aircraft?"

"That's right."

"Ok, then on the black side, you want to search the sub-quantum frequency range from pi to eighty-eight. Do the auto-scan command and it'll go through all the frequencies in that range. When you see a plane fall out of the sky, you'll know you found the right one."

"Ok, I'll give it a shot. One more thing. Will anyone be able to know what knocked them out of commission? Will they detect a signal? I don't want to raise any eyebrows."

"Nah, they'll just think it was faulty engineering. There's no way they could pick up a quantum signal like that. I feel sorry for whoever built those birds, though. They'll be taking the brunt of the blame."

Will couldn't believe it could be that simple to knock a plane out of the sky covertly, but he thanked his friend nonetheless.

"Anytime," Ray said, "Keep us posted. You've got family here, too. Don't forget that."

They ended the call and Will walked over to his wife who had an expectant look on her sumptuous face. Why did he have to do this? What he really wanted to do was make love with his wife who he hadn't seen in years. Knocking airplanes from the sky incognito wasn't what he was hoping to do his first time back home.

He sat down beside her and said, "Ok, how about we stay?"

She ran her hand through his hair and asked, "So you've got your master plan? Who were you talking to?"

"A very good friend, from the other side. Before we start catching up on our time apart, we need to figure out how to get our son here, or at the very least check with the school and see how things are there."

"I'll try calling the school, but the phone lines will probably be jammed with worried parents calling."

She walked over to grab her phone and anxiously dialed with her shaky fingers. Too much was happening all at once. She felt like she was spinning out of control. There was an automatic message that played after a couple rings.

"Thank you for contacting the Department of Caretakers. Due to high call volume, we cannot accept any new calls at this time. We can assure you that everything here is safe and secure. Life will continue to function here as normal. Thank you for your concern, and have a pleasant day."

No message was ever less reassuring in the history of mankind. This actually made the reunited couple even more uncertain.

"Well, we'll have to take a different approach," Will said thoughtfully. "In order to keep our son safe, we'll just have to, for the time being, keep an eye on the sky and on the news as well. If the invasion comes, I'll have to take action and make sure they don't get near us. In the meantime, we've got a lot of catching up to do."

They stayed up well into the middle of the night telling each other about what had transpired over the past couple of years. It all sounded so unbelievable to her, but how could she argue? She had seen the recording when his implants were disconnected. And she had witnessed enough of his otherworldly adventures to make her a believer. Will didn't tell her quite everything, though. He felt it best to keep the part about Luz a secret for the time being. Better not to ruin the first day back, he decided. He just hoped that his wife hadn't seen any recordings that she shouldn't see. After all, they were recording all day, every day, so far as he knew, so there were some very personal interactions in the mix, to say the least. He would tell her later, but not now. He tried to convince himself it was for the best.

They woke up late morning on the sofa to the sound of an urgent announcement from Free TV. Still half asleep, Will heard the robotic female voice report, "Sadly, we have learned from a reliable source that Galvin Creedy, respected corporate kingpin and philanthropist, died in his sleep last night, of an apparent heart attack."

## Chapter 53

The Rockatellers were nervous. They had good reason to be, too, after hearing the news of Galvin Creedy. They decided to get together in one of their remote mountain cabins. They figured the farther, the better.

John was fixing his gaze across the powdery mountain peaks. He felt stiff all over. Nerves can do that to a person, and John Rockateller was no different. His brother Darius was cozy by a raging fireplace behind him. They needed to get things straight, and fast.

“Heart attack, my ass,” Darius huffed angrily. John turned to face his brother.

“Is he sending us a not so discreet message?” John wondered aloud.

“Tough to say. The truth is that Mason never really saw eye to eye with Galvin. Maybe this was just the last straw. You know how Mason has a temper.”

John ran a nervous hand through his thick gray hair and began walking towards a well-stocked liquor cabinet, “I need a drink. You need a drink? Things have gotten way out of hand. Hell, for all we know, we’re being watched twenty-four-seven.”

“Yeah, pour me a scotch on the rocks, will ya?” Darius accepted the much needed offer of alcohol. “Who do you think is gonna replace Galvin?” he asked as he rubbed the back of his neck furiously.

John poured the liquid relief over ice while he pondered for a moment. Upon delivering the drink to his younger brother he took a seat on the opposite end of the sofa.

“It seems to me, if I know Mason, he’ll position someone there he can not only trust, but someone that might give him a tactical advantage, probably someone from his family.”

Darius nodded thoughtfully, “That makes sense. That way he could keep an eye on you. Regardless of who replaces Creedy, we’ve got to tone things down with Hellius. Not only should we cut communications with him for a while, but we’d better decrease his funding, and do it slowly so it doesn’t draw too much attention.”

“Agreed,” John said as he took a generous sip, “You know what, we might not be in as bad a shape as we originally thought. Mason is going to let both sides dog it out for real, right? Well, from the looks of things, unless Tyran has some miracle up his sleeve, Hellius looks like a lock to fully take over the DFS. This is unprecedented, you realize. There have been three regions for hundreds of years to keep the so-called balance of power, which of course has always been sponsored and maintained by the right families, like ours. These changes in the works are going to shake things up, and right now it looks like we’re backing the winning horse. When the time is right, if we play our cards right, we just might come out on top. Maybe it’s time the Black family made room for a new capstone. We can make it happen. Right now we just need to lay low and go on about our normal business and wait to see what happens with Hellius.”

## Chapter 54

Trinity Black watched with a careful and slightly disdainful eye as the blue-collar workers were finishing the new aquarium installation. She hated to be around those so-called inferior types. They scared her, actually. Damn unsophisticated brutes. Trinity was a clever, no-nonsense character, just like her father. Fresh out of Temple Grounds, which was the higher education center for the elite at that time, Trinity was young, ambitious, and eager to make her mark on the world. Now her father had given her that opportunity.

She turned to check on the progress of the other décor upgrades taking place around John Rockateller's office at Liberty Bank Headquarters. She found old man Rockateller's taste to be severely lacking and took it upon herself to make things more comfortable. After all, she needed a more suitable working environment. She was Trinity Black, after all.

It was into this bustling makeover that John Rockateller stepped into on what otherwise, for him, would have been a typical Tuesday. He turned white as he came through the main archway and looked on in horror as what was once his domain was now anything but that. His eyes darted around and found Trinity near the new triangular aquarium in the center of it all.

"That's not the right color!" she was busy shouting at one of the laborers. "I wanted technocracy gray, not charcoal gray, you fools! That is charcoal gray and I won't have it!"

John tried to compose himself as he approached the vigorous young vixen. He had to be tactful because of who her father was. What he really wanted to do was smash her fingers in a desk drawer and toss her out into the street. What came out was something in between.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled with hands strewn in the air. "Are you lost, little girl?"

Trinity turned to face her new employee. She didn't fluster and held a smug look in place which went well with her bowl-cut black hair and sharp eyes.

"Good morning, John. Like what I've done with the place?"

"To be honest, no, I don't. What the hell are you doing here, anyway?" he huffed as he took a mean glance at a shark in the aquarium.

"You didn't get the memo?" she said ironically. "I'm sure you know that since the unfortunate passing of Galvin Creedy, I've taken over as president of Liberty Corp. My father has also given me some additional duties as well, which is why I'm here. He said that there have been some odd numerical discrepancies lately which needed tending to."

She stopped as one of the workers caught her eye.

"No, I don't want that plant over there, put it closer to the wall! Damnit! Do I have to think of everything?"

John groaned and tried to contain himself.

"So where was I?" she continued as she turned back to her latest victim. "So father has asked me to do some work here as well, and see if I can't shed some light on these unfortunate happenings so that we may find a suitable solution."

John's hands were tied, and he knew it. What the consequences would be, he couldn't be sure, but this was a very bad sign.

"So you took it upon yourself to destroy my office as the first order of business?" John complained with a careful scowl.

Trinity smiled knowingly. She loved having this power, especially over someone so much older than she. She liked to see him squirm.

"Such harsh words, I would never do that. It's an upgrade, that's all."

Some furniture movers caught her eye.

"John, I'll leave you to your own devices, I have some pressing matters to attend to." She walked briskly over to the movers, and arms started flailing around and she shrieked more awful shrieks. John started walking around trying to find his desk in all the mayhem.

"Oh, John, one more thing!" she yelled form across the room. "I'm doing the same thing at Point of Light Energy tomorrow, so if you want to give your brother a warning, go right ahead! I wouldn't want to shock the poor lad like I've done to you!" She giggled with delight as she turned back to her decorating.

John's eyes widened and he decided to step out for some fresh air and call his brother. It was going to be a long day.

## Chapter 55

David Rothsman's yacht "Victory" cruised smoothly through the warm tropical waters. David and Troy peered over the edge of the sleek vessel and admired the calm, clear waters beneath. It was the antithesis of what was happening in their reality.

"If only the plots swirling around us were as clear as that water," David said wistfully.

"What do you make of it all?" Troy asked.

"The only certainty seems to be that we can't trust anyone anymore," David lamented.

"Agreed." The two brusque oligarchs stood to face each other.

"It's obvious that Mason doesn't trust anyone, either. That move of putting his little girl overseeing the Rockateller boys is unprecedented. Mason might as well have given them a boot to the twig and berries, it might have been less painful," David observed somewhat sardonically.

Troy couldn't help but laugh a bit at the whole situation with Trinity. She had moved in on the Rockateller's turf and come down on them with what amounted to a velvet fist. They were still technically at the top of their respective corporations, but now they had to answer to Mason's little proxy hussy.

"Barely out of her university studies, that arrogant little tart," Troy quipped. "You should have seen the look on Darius' face. What could be worse than bowing down to that wretched little girl, right?"

They both chuckled at their fellow corporate masters' degradation. David then grew serious.

"This is something that must not happen to us, Troy. We've got to take proper measures to ensure we don't get tripped up like our unfortunate colleagues."

Troy nodded in agreement and said, "They brought this on themselves, ya know. They're too damn overt and sloppy."

"That's true, brother. Very true. I think it would be to our advantage to make a plan which might safeguard our own position. Not only that, but I'm thinking we might have a chance to make some unprecedented moves ourselves. We just need to be more clever and less overt than our associates have been."

"How do you propose we begin?" Troy asked excitedly.

David thought for a moment and then keenly stated, "I found Mason's reaction to what we brought to his attention at the meeting to be disconcerting, first of all. It seemed as if he was going to sit on his hands, which is quite unlike him. Now that he's put Trinity in place to have more oversight over the Rockatellers, it seems quite obvious that he's got something in the works himself. I don't believe his posture to be solely defensive. Our first step should be to find out what he's doing and why. Once we have that information at our disposal, the murky waters will clear up a bit and we can make our next move."

Troy nodded to his brother and said, "All right, let's get to the drawing board. This game is for all the marbles."

## Chapter 56

The pompous queen was tired. She had just traveled two hours with her buffoon husband to get to a destination in the middle of nowhere. "The horrendous things I put up with," she thought to herself. She was now being led down a dank tunnel to see for herself the progress being made on her little deal with certain power brokers. Her eccentric husband insisted on coming along, which meant that this meeting with Mr. Bush would be business only.

The end of the tunnel opened into a brightly lit, vaulted lab area. The lab was full of all sorts of computers, devices, strange contraptions, bubbling liquids, and various other oddities. Awaiting their arrival amidst all this scientific dabbling was Barack Bush along with a couple of unknown characters, one male and one female, standing courteously on either side of him.

"Queen Sitan, you look lovelier than ever, welcome!" Bush greeted her in a brash tone and gently kissed her hand. He turned his attention to the king, who was gawking around and fiddling with his red cape. "King Sitan, that's a lovely cape you have."

Sitan looked at him with dopey eyes and responded happily, "Yeah, I made it myself, with the help of Captain Wiggles, of course."

Confused, Bush turned to the queen for answers.

"It's the damn cat," she said as she rolled her eyes.

Bush looked at the king smugly and said, "How quaint." Then turning to the queen whispered, "Are you sure it's safe for him to be here? Ya know, around all this equipment and such."

The queen folded her arms and said, "Maybe not, but I always find it better to keep a close eye on him. If he goes wandering around out there, who knows what could happen. He'll be fine. And by the way, could this facility be in a worse godforsaken spot?"

"All in the name of security, my dear."

"Yeah, whatever," she pouted.

"Well, we've got a lot to show you, my dear." Bush said with a sly grin. He turned to the white-coated scientists flanking both sides of him and gave them the nod to proceed. The female scientist began leading them towards the first exhibit, about a ten foot long capsule with four fins on one end.

"This is our exploding bird," she announced proudly.

Barack could see that his pretentious partner was about to say something, but he held up his hand to stop her.

"What we've done is combined flight technology, with chemical explosion technology. In essence, these birds can be fired from a ground apparatus, as you see here holding the bird in place. The strike range we currently have is only five hundred miles, but we expect to improve upon that shortly. We are also working on a smaller version which can be fired from flying machines. Within the next few months, we will have a fleet of flying machines equipped with exploding birds."

Sitan looked confused and innocently asked, "Why would you want to blow up a bird? I like birds. Birds are nice!"

There was an awkward tension amongst the group.

"Damnit, don't interrupt," the queen yelped at her hapless husband.

The male scientist took over and led them to a transparent body suit hanging prominently across from the 'exploding bird'.

"This is still a work in progress, but we've managed to nearly replicate the bulletproof technology from, well, you know where. It isn't completely effective yet, but we've had a success rate of near fifty percent and are confident that by the end of the year we will have it nearly flawless," he explained as he puffed out a proud chest.

"What's he doing?" the female scientist shrieked as she pointed to the curious king. "No, don't touch that!" both scientists screamed. They ran over to the dopey king and nearly tackled him as he was about to touch a bubbling yellow liquid.

"It's pretty, I wanted to touch it!" the puppet king defended himself.

"What's so dangerous about that liquid?" the queen demanded as she scowled at her husband.

"That's what we call a passive potion, which might be the most effective weapon we've been able to develop. Instead of blowing up and killing everything in sight, someone in our psychology department who was reviewing some of the otherworld tech had the bright idea that perhaps it would be better to subdue a population in a more humane manner."

Barack looked like a kid in a candy store at this point, very anxious because he knew what was coming, having already been given the grand tour.

"What it does is make people extremely passive and suggestible, not able to fight even if you're holding a knife to their throat. However, in order to disperse such a marvelous weapon in urban warfare, we think it would be most effective to do so through the air. We are currently in the process of aerosolizing the drug so that it can be sprayed over large population centers. Isn't that exciting!" the female scientist gushed.

The queen had a self-satisfied look about her and she grinned widely at Lord Bush.

"Isn't it the most wonderful thing, my dear!" he shouted. "One day we might not even need propaganda anymore! It's a true breakthrough! I see that you must be equally pleased, am I right?"

"Indeed I am, this is most exciting."

## Chapter 57

The previous day had passed quietly in 0777 and Will's little apartment. They talked, laughed, cried, and reignited the spark that had been dormant for so much time. It was also an anxious time, however, as the pending invasion was, in Will's estimation, a virtual certainty.

It was the following day, however, which had a very jolting start. Awoken in the wee hours of the morning, Will gasped and sat up abruptly. He heard a loud roaring noise. Quickly jumping out of bed and running to the window, he looked out and soon was overcome with horror. Roaring lights were streaking in the skies above. At least they weren't shooting, yet, but that was only a matter of time. They weren't here to bring anything good, that much was certain.

0777 turned over and looked at him through groggy eyes.

"What's that awful noise?" she asked sleepily. He turned to face her. His look said it all, but he spoke anyway.

"Unwanted company." He started hastily throwing on some clothes.

"What are you doing? Where are you going? What's going on?" she demanded with panic in her voice.

"The invasion is underway. That noise you hear is from flying machines, lots of them. Look!" Will explained as calmly as he could and pointed out the window. His wife's face dropped open and quickly filled with fear and doubt. As he neared the bedroom door to walk out she called out to him.

"Where are you going? You're not going out, are you?"

He smiled calmly and assured her, "Hopefully not, I'll try and save the world from the comfort of home, but I want to be prepared to leave if necessary."

She jumped out of bed, threw on a long t-shirt, and followed him out.

He picked up the slim device that Ray had coached him on in their call from two days prior. He started pounding madly on the screen as he aimed it towards the window, not knowing really if aim was necessary. Forgot to ask that little detail, Oh, well.

0777 stared out the window of their living room and shook her head as machine after machine flew past. To her it seemed an endless stream of torment. In reality, it was only about a squad of one-hundred of Hellius' best instruments of attack, fully equipped with four rocket launchers, two on each wing. They weren't firing yet, so it seemed logical to Will that their main concern was military and government installations.

The TV turned itself on and a robotic voice calmly repeated the order to "stay calm, stay in your homes, do not panic."

"Who are they kidding?" Will thought. "There, I think I got it," Will said triumphantly. The screen read, "FREQUENCY LOCKED IN – PRESS SMILEY FACE TO INITIATE OR FROWNY FACE TO ABORT." Will lost himself in laughter and rolled over holding his stomach on the sofa.

"You think this is funny!" his wife yelled.

Will couldn't help himself. He knew that his crew from the other side had great fun programming this little apparatus. He gathered himself and hit the smiley face. Nothing happened, or so he thought. No noise, no flash, no nothing.

"Well, guess I'll give it a minute. If it doesn't work, we'll have to resort to plan B," Will said with a hopeful face.

0777 came to sit next to him on the sofa and asked, "What's plan B?"

"I don't really have a plan B, so let's hope this works," he shrugged.

Suddenly, off in the distance, one by one, the roaring lights began to randomly drop chaotically from the sky. Moments later, fireballs were launching into the air as the falling craft reached its bitter end.

Will breathed the biggest sigh of relief his lungs could muster and stared out the window to admire the show. His astonished and grateful wife put her arm around him as she, too, watched the spectacle.

"I'll have to meet this friend of yours," she said.

Will laughed for sheer joy and kissed his wife on the cheek. They were safe, as were the people of the Democratic Free State, at least for the moment. But how to proceed?

## Chapter 58

Days later, Will decided to go out for a walk. His wife had left for work early. He was tired of being cooped up in his dingy little apartment. He had become so accustomed to large living spaces and living in rural areas that he now felt imprisoned in this city environment.

“To think I actually enjoyed the city life before,” he thought with amazement.

Upon stepping into the street he was quickly approached by a large man wearing all black who smiled and motioned for him to stop and then ordered calmly, “Please step into the car, sir.” Will noticed that the man had his hand inside his jacket pocket so it was safe to assume that there was a concealed firearm and the man meant business. Will was wearing his transparent armor which gave him the gumption to resist.

“I’d rather not,” he replied politely.

Another well-built character clad in all black stepped forward and both said simultaneously, “Please step into the car, sir. Don’t make this difficult.”

Will decided that he might be bulletproof, but he’d rather not find out if he was car accident proof or god knows what else they might try. He nodded reluctantly and stepped into the black limo.

Once inside, one man sat on either side of him. Both were wearing sunglasses and poker faces. They sped off, but Will’s mind raced faster than the car. Who were these guys? If they wanted to harm you, they probably would have already done it. Or would they? As far as kidnappings go, riding in a limo didn’t seem too bad. He had always imagined kidnappings to be in rusty clunkers. Couldn’t hurt to ask questions... Or could it? One way to find out.

“May I ask where we’re going, or is it a big surprise?” Will inquired as he tried to maintain calm through humor.

“Mr. Black wishes to speak with you,” came a frosty reply as the brute cracked his knuckles.

“I know so many Mr. Blacks, could you be more specific?” Will pushed on.

“Mason Black,” came the brusque answer. Will giggled at the absurdity.

“Mason Black, the richest man in the world? You’re taking me to see him?”

There was no response, just cold, blank stares.

“May I ask why?”

More chilly reception. Will decided to keep quiet for the time being.

A never-ending twenty minutes later, the limo parked curbside next to World Corp. Tower. It was a sparkling spectacle which inspired awe, even for someone who had been to the other side. The two thugs escorted Will into the building and the limo pulled away slowly. Straight to the elevator, and once inside, in order to access the 101<sup>st</sup> floor, one of the guards scanned his tongue and up they went.

The 101<sup>st</sup> floor was all Mason Black’s, every square millimeter. The entrance was a heavily armored vaulted archway which required another tongue scan from the brute. The velvet ropes of steel parted and a dazzling sight filled the senses upon entering. The place was big enough and fancy enough to be a castle in its own right.

Will noticed a desk, which he assumed to belong to a secretary, which looked like an ant in comparison to the grand size of the environment, was empty. Maybe she was

out sick? Or maybe, and the more likely reason, was that Mason Black was planning on speaking about things and possibly doing things which he didn't want any witnesses for. This was a bad sign, but he didn't want to make himself fearful through speculation so he discarded that unlikely scenario.

They came to the beautifully carved enormous wooden doors of Mr. Black's main office and again the mindless thug scanned his tongue. The doors parted slowly and, once open, revealed the so-called richest and most powerful man in the world. He was sitting up straight in an expectant manner and grinned upon seeing the arrival of his guest.

"Please, come in, Writer 2001, or shall I call you Will?" Mason greeted him in a cordial manner.

Will stepped in cautiously and the guards shut the doors behind him. Well, as far as kidnappings go, he felt this to be going rather smoothly. He also realized that this was due to change at any moment. Mason stood and began walking towards his much anticipated guest.

"Please, if you'd like, we should get comfortable in a more socially designed area," he said as he motioned towards another side of the room. It had a wall-sized aquarium and was fully arranged as a palatial living room with priceless furniture which also could pass for artwork on display if not used for sitting. Will noted that just that particular corner of the office was larger than his entire apartment.

They eyed each other as they walked leisurely paces towards their destination. They met at the back of a fine leather sofa and Mason broke the ice further by offering a drink.

"What do you have?" Will asked with a sarcastic tone. He knew that probably everything under the sun was available somewhere in the building.

"I drink scotch," Mason informed his guest.

"Scotch is marvelous, I shall have a scotch then," Will accepted as he tried to return to a more elegant tone.

Mason fetched two generous pours of his finest and came back to hand Will his glass, "Please, have a seat, we have much to discuss."

Will took a seat on the sofa and Mason sat facing him in a sparkling golden throne.

Mason looked at him smugly.

"Where to begin?"

Will took his first sip and was struck by the quality. It was better than anything he ever had in the DFS before, but paled in comparison to the fine liqueurs of the otherworld. Will gave a direct answer.

"You brought me here, Mr. Black, begin wherever you like."

"I appreciate your candor, and so I will. I suppose we shall start at the beginning. What do you remember about how you got to the other side of the world?"

Will considered this for a moment and said, "To be honest, I don't remember. I've had memory problems for years."

Mason cackled his psycho-cackle and took a sip of his drink.

"Please, Will, in order for this conversation to be kept cordial, I suggest you don't lie to me."

Will got serious and nodded. "Ok, let's see. I remember everything but the day of the trip. I remember there was a pilot, but that's it. Everything else from that one particular day is a blur. I know things happened, I can feel them, but I don't have clear memories. Also, up until recently, I had severe memory problems. I could remember general things about my past environment, but not any specific personal items. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"What I know of you is none of your concern," Mason hissed. "Moving on, let's..." Mason began but was cut off by Will.

"No, let's not move on just yet. Let's flesh this out a little bit. How is it that you think you have the right to drug me and put implants in my head? Can you answer that for me, Mr. Black? Then I'll be happy to move on."

Mason took a deep breath. "Very well, I'll humor you. It's really quite simple. You volunteered to do what you did."

"I did no such thing!" Will objected. "I volunteered to help my country and my people. I wasn't made aware of what horrors that would entail."

Mr. Black held up his hand in protest, "And you didn't ask any questions, either. You readily submitted yourself to blindly do anything to save your people and to make a better life for your family."

Will sat silent and flustered. It was true, he remembered volunteering. He did want something better for his family. He had been tired of struggling financially. He wanted the best for his wife and son and he had been lured blindly into doing something with horrific consequences. He didn't ask questions, so in a certain way, he was partly to blame.

"Moving on," Mason continued coldly as his dark eyes pierced into Will, "From what I've seen, you had some marvelous experiences on the other side of that damned wall. In a way I envy you. You accomplished your mission, although it was cut much shorter than we were hoping. And you came back, so here you are. You weren't supposed to come back, but you probably already know that, right?"

Will acknowledged it was a true statement. He decided not to comment on the failed attempt to poison him upon removing the implants.

Mason continued speaking with a smug attitude, "I'm sure that you're troubled by the current situation of our beloved country. The Divine Nation has waged all-out war against the fine people of the DFS. Thanks to you, in part, technology has advanced greatly the past few years, as I'm sure you've noticed. The recently attempted air assault by the Divine Nation had a most bizarre conclusion, would you agree?"

"Perhaps an act of God," Will said seriously as he looked the aquarium up and down behind his host. Mason laughed.

"That would be ironic, wouldn't it! An act of God downing one-hundred flying machines of the Divine Nation! You have a remarkable sense of humor, very dark, much like my own. However, I remind you again that honesty with me is absolutely the best policy. Let me come at it from another angle. How did you down those machines?"

Will gulped and looked into the man's eyes.

"I don't know what you're talking about. If I had that kind of power, then I wouldn't have let your goon squad kidnap me, now would I?"

Mason, filled with rage, threw his glass across the room where it shattered near his desk. Well, so much for being cordial.

"Don't lie to me!" he fumed. "You leave me no choice!" he shrieked as he walked briskly towards his desk. He grabbed a remote control and flicked on a large screen monitor to the right of Will's seat. It was 0777, tied up and bleeding. Rage now filled both men.

"You leave her out of this! Please, she has done nothing!" pleaded Will.

It fell on deaf ears. Mason got near the monitor and yelled at Will, "I will gladly leave her out of this! All you have to do is deliver me your little bag of tricks! That's all I want, is just your souvenirs from the other side, and no more harm will come to her!"

Will didn't hesitate. He couldn't bear to see this. He shouted at the monitor, "Computer, remove camouflage!"

Magically, a black bag appeared against the white wall it was resting against. Will took a gasp of relief and Mason smirked with dark pleasure.

"You see, that wasn't so hard, now was it?" Mason said with cruel condescension. He barked orders at the thugs to bring the bag to their designated destination at once. Then the monitor was switched off.

"How do I know she's ok? I want to see," Will pleaded.

"You have my word that she is being released and will not be harmed further. I find it unfortunate that it was necessary to do such a thing, but sometimes violent coercion is necessary to make things happen which need to happen."

"You're wrong, violent coercion is never necessary, and in fact, it is in opposition to Natural Law," Will said defiantly.

Mason Black's face lit up with dark amusement. Who was this, a slave, speaking of Natural Law?

"What do you know of such things?" Mason asked with great curiosity in his voice.

"I know a great deal more than you might imagine, Mr. Black. I know that what is taught in the schools about the other side of the planet is a complete lie. There is peace and freedom there, not chaos. And here, where we are taught there is freedom, there is chaos and slavery. I know that you and your psychopathic gang withhold the keys of wisdom from the people, in order that you may rule with ignorance and fear as your weapons."

Mason Black gave a seething response, "People? What people? All I see are animals who refuse to use their minds and hearts. They deserve what they get, 2001, they most certainly do. We keep those animals in order, that's what we do. They need us!"

Will interrupted, 'No, I've seen proof on the other side of that wall! People live in harmony with Natural Law. They have freedom, peace, and prosperity. They broke the chains of slavery long ago! And look at the fruits they have brought about! They create wonders and travel to the stars! Your pathetic little control structure couldn't even create flying machines until you stole it from them. Nearly everything you have, Mason Black, you have stolen! Not only that, but you have murdered how many millions and thrown how many others in cages!"

"I have stolen nothing and I have murdered nobody! That is where you are wrong. You see, I give orders to individuals. That's all I do. The individual has a choice, and if you're such an expert in Natural Law then you should be aware of this. The individual has a choice of either to follow my orders or not, to steal or not, to murder or not! I have never pulled a trigger! Even in the case of your wife, did I strike her? No, those mindless fools did. They are no better than dogs, never thinking for themselves, doing whatever it takes for me to throw them a treat. Money, a TV show, a carnival, a sporting event, comfort and diversions. They enforce my laws! They collect the taxes! They pull the triggers! They throw their fellow man in cages! No, they have responsibility for those actions, not I!"

Both men stared each other down and didn't blink. Will finally responded.

"That might well be, Mr. Black, but you are culpable in your own right. You cut the legs off the cow and then curse it when it cannot walk. And what would you do without your slaves, Mr. Black? You are just as fearful as everyone under your mind control is, if not more. You and your family might have to actually do something besides scheme on how to maintain your opulent lifestyle through mind control. You might have to actually do something in accordance with Natural Law and not diametrically opposed to it. Instead of sharing the truth of Natural Law and the Trivium with your fellow man, you hide it and use it to your own disgraceful and selfish purposes. You keep others in darkness so that you can reign in hell, helping to destroy countless lives. You are, Mason Black, nothing more than a coward."

Mr. Black looked smugly at this man before him.

"So what now, 2001? What will you do?"

Will responded, "You're not going to kill me?"

"No, of course not. Why would I do that now? You can suffer with everyone else. I'm curious as to what you plan to do, though. Will you run back to the other side? I imagine you have the means to do so."

"I might, or I might not. Another option is to educate the people about Natural Law so they can break free from the slavery you've helped put them under."

Mason laughed heartily.

"The people don't want to know. You can tell them truth until you're blue in the face and they will never change. Not only will they not change, but they won't even listen! Hell, they might even kill you for telling them the truth! The fact is, they love their servitude! They love to believe the lie! They don't even know what their rights are or are not! They don't know right from wrong! Their thoughts, emotions, and actions are in complete chaos. So go ahead, preach all you want, Mr. Will 2001! You will be wasting your life on futile efforts, and the world will go on as it always has-- those with knowledge, will, and wisdom ruling over those who do not. They choose to be slaves and will continue to do so, forever."

"That might be, but I will do my best effort to help educate them because it is the right thing to do. Sharing knowledge is right, and I will do right, and concealing knowledge is wrong, and that is what you do, Mr. Black, what you do is wrong. Goodbye, Mason Black." Will turned and started walking towards the exit.

"My driver will take you wherever you wish. Goodbye, Will." Mason spoke from behind.

"I'll find my own way," Will said as he kept walking.

Upon reaching the street, Will hurried to get to the train station. He was desperate to get home to see his beloved and give her comfort after such a gruesome attack. Once aboard the old, creaky vessel, Will tried to focus on what to do next. He needed a plan of action. He knew that getting truth into the hearts and minds of a great number of people would take a far longer time than he had to live. He also was thinking that perhaps for the safety of his family, they might need to get to the other side again. He knew his friends would welcome them with open arms, even Luz, despite the awkward feelings such a situation would present. But he had to do something to give the people a chance at freedom. His conscience wouldn't let him leave without making a legitimate effort to help people find truth. He had to plant a seed, but how? He knew that a seed could grow into something beautiful if tended with attention and care. He also was aware that a seed might not take root and would die before it had a chance to flourish. Either way, he would plant that seed.

And what about all of the technology handed over to Mason Black? What would be the repercussions of that? He felt sick inside that he had unwittingly given aide to that sinister creature. He took solace in the fact that not all the gadgets were in the bag. He still had a few scattered around the apartment. Hopefully the goon squad wasn't smart enough to look around before or after they got the main stash.

Was Will up to the task? Were the people willing to listen and learn? Did they have the courage to say no to the oligarchy? Jovius was right. This would take an enormous amount of will power.

## Chapter 59

The next few weeks were full of mental activity and preparation for Will and his wife. The first thing Will did was to convince his wife to take a name, rather than be called by a degrading number. They decided on the name Care. He was now Will, and she was Care. Will convinced her to quit her job. He taught her the basics of Natural Law. It was something which she understood quite naturally. She always had had a feeling deep inside that something was wrong, that the reality she was living in could be changed for the better. She just didn't understand and couldn't express what it was. Natural Law put into very simple terms what she had been feeling all along. She had never felt so good inside, like a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

They were also extremely busy making preparations for the big day. Their son was returning from school and they had mixed feelings on how things would go with him. First of all, he hadn't seen his father in years, so that would be an emotional roller coaster in itself. However, an element was added to make things more complicated. They had to tell their son they were moving to the other side of the world. When he asked why, which they knew he would, there wouldn't be time for a detailed explanation. He would learn, over time, why they were doing what they were doing.

The tool bag from the other side was gone, of course, having been stolen by Mason's goons, but one key thing had been left behind. There was a 3D printer in the bedroom. Of all the things to be left with, Will was ecstatic that it was the printer. With this tool, he could make a great number of other devices, which was necessary for their plan of action. He had had a great deal of communication with his crew from the other side. He was so grateful for them, he couldn't put it into words. Jovius, of course, mocked him in good humor about how Will was "tucking tail and running" and "didn't even last a month". Will had also spent countless hours preparing his "seed" writing.

They were anxiously awaiting the arrival of their son. He was due in any minute. Will was nervous. Would he even remember me? Would he hate me? They waited with dinner waiting on the small rickety dining room table. It was the typical bland food that most people were accustomed to in the DFS. Will glanced down at the vanilla dinner before him.

"I can't wait to have some real food on the other side. Boy, do I miss the variety." Care slapped him on the shoulder playfully.

"What? You don't like my cooking?"

Will laughed. "No, no, your cooking is great, given the circumstances. You'll see what I mean when we get over there. Oh, and coffee! I can't wait for you to try coffee!"

Suddenly, the front door flung open and ran their pride and joy. He stopped cold in his tracks upon seeing his father. His little mouth gaped open and his eyes widened. Will gave his son a caring smile and said, "Hello, son."

The boy finally forced himself to blink as he screamed, "Dad! You're back, you're back, you're back!" He ran to his father and they embraced tightly like never before. They all shared tears of joy. They were a family again!

## Chapter 60

"It's time," Care said, "Do or die, are you ready?"

Will grimaced as he replied, "Not the best choice of words, but yes, I'm ready." He looked at her and admired her for a moment and asked, "Are you ready, tech wizard? Your role here is just as important."

She took a deep breath and assured him, "As long as your friends know what they're doing, then sure. They gave me most of the technical instructions. I just implemented them."

"Ok, there's no sense in waiting around. I'm ready. Start the recording," Will said confidently. And this is the message that Will recorded.

"Greetings. My name is Will, formerly known as Writer 2001. Please do not adjust your TV sets. The transmission from your normal source has been temporarily interrupted. For those of you who work for the television stations on this half of the world, you needn't bother to try and disrupt my transmission. You don't possess the means to do so.

There are those of you out there who have ears to hear and eyes to see, and it is to you that I am sending this message of hope and knowledge. For countless centuries, the vast majority of people have labored and toiled as slaves to a tiny minority. We are taught that this is the natural way of things and is necessary for security and freedom. From the time of birth to the time we die, the same message is pounded into our brains. This message is sold to us as truth, when it is actually the antithesis of truth. In the schools, we are told what to think, not how to think, or why thinking is necessary for freedom. We are taught that following orders is necessary for security and order, which is another lie. The media you consume on television reinforces these lies. Look around you. Constant war. Constant murder. Constant fear. Constant diversions. Ask yourself this question. Does the world we live in look free? The two core messages in the schools and in the media are this: The belief in external authority and the belief in money as necessary components of freedom and security. Both are the biggest lies. Another key aspect to the mind control we all have fallen under through schooling and corporate media is the destruction of imagination. If we cannot imagine a different world, then it surely will not be possible to build.

But I am not here to simply harp on such things. The core of this message is good news. I have been on the other side of the wall. The love, peace, freedom, and prosperity I witnessed on the other side of that wall was so fantastic that I struggle to find words to describe it. It is the opposite of how we live on this side. They have no war. They have no famine. They are traveling to the stars, while we here are struggling just to stay alive. The question you must ask yourself is "Why"? Asking this question is the first step on a long journey, a journey which I began just years ago and will surely continue the rest of my life as my quest and thirst for knowledge continues. I, by no means, am claiming to know everything. However, I can share the good news of what I

have learned and what I have seen so that those of you with the will to do so can make this side of the world a better place to live and thrive.

In order for freedom to occur, it is necessary for individuals to know what their rights are, and what their rights are not. All people have equal rights. Rights cannot be granted by man or taken away by man. Rights are inherent in nature. To understand the rights you have, it is easier and more expedient to learn what your rights are not. No being has the right to steal, murder, or bring violent harm to another being. However, if a person does attempt violence or theft against you, it is also your right to defend yourself and your property with force. That's it. It's that simple. Isn't it beautiful? Living in accordance with these simple and elegant truths will bring peace, freedom, and prosperity.

Let's take a moment to examine specifically what I mean. I mean that police, you do not have the right to put someone in a cage we call "prison". You are causing harm to that person. Military, you do not have the right to attack people with violence. This is not to say that you don't have the right to defend yourself. If a person takes violent aggression against you, you do have the right to defend yourself. However, do wars really take place in this manner? Certainly not. Wars are fear-based and not in alignment with truth. There is no right to make war. Bureaucrats, you do not have the right to tax people. Tax is theft. Theft is not a right. Voluntary exchange is a right, taxation is theft. Also, bureaucrats, you do not have the right to force children into schools or to pump them full of drugs.

The bottom line is, those of you who work for coercive institutions backed by the threat of violence, military, police, bureaucracy, you all have individual choices to make. If you choose to live according to everyone's natural rights, then you will cease to be a soldier, policeman, or bureaucrat; and great strides will be made towards freedom if this occurs. However, at the moment, nearly all who live on this side of the world are making the opposite choice. People are violating each other's rights constantly, which is why there is so much suffering and chaos in our world.

All others who do not work for these institutions of coercion, you also have the same responsibility to live according to natural rights. It is everyone's responsibility. Everyone must learn to say the word "NO" when told to violate someone's rights or when their rights are being violated. No, I will not murder! No, I will not go to war! No, I will not take this person's property against their will! I will not cause harm to sentient beings! No, you will not put my child in a government school. No, I will not take your drugs. 'No' is one of the most powerful words in the universe, it must be used to attain freedom! Without individuals following orders and doing wrong to each other, the Mason Blacks, Rockatellers, Rothschilds, and all the other so-called corporate masters, will lose their empire of slavery. You will no longer work and die for them, or presidents, high priests, or kings.

In order for positive change to happen in our world, it is up to each individual to learn truth and to have the will, care, and courage to live according to that truth. The basic principles which I have discussed in this brief message, along with some further detail for your study, has been sent to all computer addresses in all three regions of the world. I hope you will all begin your journey on the path to enlightenment and freedom, as I have, and that this world will transform into a much better world, free of suffering.

Perhaps, one day, the wall will even come down and we can live in harmony with our brethren on the other side of the world. In order for the physical wall to come down, however, the first step is to take down the mental walls which keep humanity imprisoned.

Before I leave you, I will say this. I want to thank you for your time and I hope you will take the truths I have spoken to heart. For those of you who wish to learn more, we will be in touch. Lastly, the choices you make in the coming years will lead down one of two paths, either to destruction, or to a beautiful creation. The choice is yours.”

He nodded to his wife to stop recording. He had never looked so content. She approached him and kissed him softly on his forehead. He smiled at her and said, “Ok, you get ready to broadcast while I check on our out-of-this-world taxi service.”

He called Tai to check and see if everything was going according to plan. He didn’t want to risk getting nabbed by a goon squad after that recording was transmitted. A friendly voice greeted him.

“Hey, your friendly neighborhood government agent of chaos here, how may I direct your call?”

“That’s not funny, Tai. Well, I guess it kind of is. Anyway, we’re about to broadcast. Will you be here on time?”

“We will be there on time, don’t you worry. Looking forward to meeting the family,” Tai answered happily.

“We? Who else is coming?” Will started to worry.

“Well, you know that my phantom ship only carries two people, so we’re bringing an extra ship. Jovius is manning the other vessel. Don’t worry. I trained him on the controls yesterday and he seemed to get it.”

“Seemed to get it? Great, and there are five of us total, so that leaves an odd man out.” Will said as he started pacing.

“Your son is young enough to ride in the cargo hold, right?” Tai asked seriously.

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“Not joking. Don’t worry, he’ll be fine. Have I ever steered you wrong?”

“It’s not you I’m worried about, Tai, it’s Jovius. Well, I guess there’s not much point in arguing. You’ll be at the spot in an hour?”

“Should be, if we get delayed, we’ll call.”

“Don’t be too late. I don’t want to be out past curfew and have to deal with any government thugs.”

“Relax. Do what you need to do and we’ll be there. See you soon.” Tai cut the call.

“Everything ok?” Care asked.

“Not really, but I guess it’ll work out. Don’t ask,” he said as he tried to laugh it off.

Their son came out of his bedroom, all too excited.

“Are we really flying into space?”

“You better believe it!” Will assured him. “Are you ready to fly?”

“I was born ready!” the little man yelled triumphantly.

“Ok, we’re leaving in a little while.”

He looked over at his wife who was multi-tasking feverishly. She was banging away at a keyboard, sliding fingers methodically on a tablet, and checking readouts on

the transmitter they had made with the 3D printer. Then she stopped suddenly and fixed a glittering gaze at her family.

"Ready," she said proudly.

"I just hope the receivers are ready," Will said ponderously.

They took the next few minutes talking about the new world and life they were about to embark on. Will was feeling ecstatic because he knew what a joyous life was awaiting them. Care and their son, however, were still having some anxiety and doubts. A world without banks and without government? No police, no soldiers, no public schools? It truly stretched the limits of their imagination, but they trusted in Will and what he had experienced.

"Ok, it's time," Care said, "Who wants to push the green button?"

"I do! I do!" her son volunteered. He looked up at his father who gave the nod of approval. He pressed the green button on the transmitter with wonder and delight.

"Ok, time to go to the park," Will announced.

They took one final look around their dingy little place they called home and unceremoniously bid it goodbye.

When they arrived at the park, Tai and Jovius were already waiting for them, leaning back against the invisible ships.

"What took you so long?" Jovius quipped.

Tai sighed and said, "We'll have to save the pleasantries for later. We should get out of here before we draw too much attention."

"I'll ride with Jovius," Will said reluctantly. He figured that his wife and child would be safer riding with Tai.

"But I want to ride with you, Dad," his son pleaded.

Will patted his son on the head, "I know you do, and I promise we will fly together lots of times in the future, but for right now it's better you fly with your mom, ok?"

"Why?" asked his puzzled son.

"I'll explain later," Will replied.

"Computer, show entrance hatch," Tai commanded and a small hatch and ladder appeared on both craft. They climbed in and took off in an invisible flash.

Once airborne, Will asked Jovius, "Hey, were you able to monitor the transmission and make sure it went through ok?"

"Everything went off without a hitch," Jovius happily answered, "At least as far as the message went."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I forgot how to activate the life pods for when we get into space," Jovius said seriously.

"That's not funny," Will chided.

"Oh, come on man, it's funny. You'll laugh later," Jovius replied.

Will shrugged and decided to enjoy the ride.

## Chapter 61

Queen Sitan was well-primped as always and she was waiting anxiously for her meeting to begin. She was told that the news was excellent but that the meeting needed to be conducted in person. Joining her was the old reliable General Mars. She didn't like many people, but she had a respect for him due to his blunt, no-nonsense nature. He was basically the antithesis of her husband, who she had thankfully left behind in the care of some royal guards.

"This better be good. I'm missing out on my normal tee time," griped the ancient military master. The queen couldn't help but find the old man humorous.

"I'm sure Mr. Hissinger won't disappoint. He said it's urgent, and you know how he is," she said as she admired her claw-like fingernails.

Taking notice of her bright red claws, the general exclaimed gruffly, "What do you need those damn monstrosities hanging off your pretty little hands for? You fighting some wild animal later or something?"

She answered slyly, "Well, I might have to take on that damn cat, Captain Wiggles, that the king insists on keeping around."

The general shook his head sadly.

"He sleeps with the damn thing, can you believe that!" she continued.

"Sadly, yes, I can believe it. I can't believe that technically I answer to that guy," he said disdainfully.

"If it makes you feel better, in reality, you take orders from me," the queen said pompously as she giggled heartily.

Zee Hissinger appeared at the entrance of the dungeon-like secret military facility where they were meeting.

"Well, there he is. Nice of you to join us, Zee," the grumpy general croaked.

"Always a pleasure to see you, General Mars," Zee brusquely greeted the old man.

"No it's not, Zee, all these years and you still lie to my face, huh?" said the ill-mannered general.

Brushing this off, Zee greeted the queen and took a seat. He placed two strange-looking electronic devices on the table.

"What are those?" Mars wondered aloud.

"Hell if I know," Hissinger hissed, "It's your scientists' job to find out and to make the most of it. Word is that it should give you a decisive advantage when the time comes. By the looks of things, the DFS and Divine Nation are fairly evenly matched and it could be years until they conclude their war, which is perfect for us. This gives us time to take advantage of the new tools I just laid before you. I leave it in your capable hands, General Mars."

Mars grabbed one of the contraptions to look it over.

"How flattering," he huffed. "Where did you get these?"

Hissinger curtly replied, "That's on a need to know basis, as always, General Mars. We'll just say it came from on high, how about that?"

"You damn intel guys are such smart asses," quipped General Grouchy. "All right, well, I'll have a team get right on it. Queen Sitan, make sure you keep that money rolling in."

The pretentious lady played with her hair casually and said, "Yeah, I'm cutting back some social programs and raising taxes again, so don't worry, General. This project is top priority." She admired her claws once again and squealed, "Any other business, gentlemen?"

"Actually," Zee started, "About that pirated television transmission from a couple days back. We're taking measures to more closely monitor personal communications amongst the populace. There are some who feel that global surveillance has been too lax in recent years, and that transmission has ruffled some very powerful feathers. Also, domestic police measures are to become more vigilant. Mr. Gray will be sending you orders."

"You're really worried about that little speech?" Queen Sitan asked curtly.

"We're just taking precautions, that's all, my lady."

"The little people can't think, Zee. Why should we waste resources on more surveillance? You really think they have the mental capacity to do anything against us?"

Zee became very serious and replied scoldingly to the young queen.

"Never underestimate the power of truth."

## Chapter 62

Royal Patrol Officer 6060 was having a rough time. He had just received word from his boss that his normal annual bonus was not going to be paid this year.

"Nothing I can do," his boss had said, "Government is making some cutbacks."

Now he was at a supermarket to pick up a snack.

"What do you mean, five royal dollars for a chocolate bar? It was only four last week!" he snickered at the cashier.

"Sales tax increase," she said dryly.

He turned red and frowned. Lower salary, more taxes. What can you do, right? That's just how it is. He grudgingly handed over the cash.

Back in his patrol car, he greedily munched on his treat as he looked over the paperwork for his next assignment in the afternoon.

"Another eviction," he thought, "That's the fifth one this month. Married couple, ages sixty-five and seventy, retired, fixed income. Those homeless shelters are already overflowing. Something's gotta change."

He polished off the rest of his treat and looked at the time. Pill time. He snagged a little white pill from his shirt pocket and gulped it down. Then he got on the radio to headquarters.

"6060 reporting in, on my way to evict from property 935.554.112."

"Copy that, 6060. Request backup?" came the scratchy voice from the other end.

"Negative, I think I can handle it alone," he said before cutting the transmission.

As he drove to his destination, the pill started to kick in. His comfortable fog started wafting and his nerves tuned out. His daughter crossed his mind, "Crazy kid," he thought. Then he drifted to the pirate transmission he had witnessed from a man called Will. "Crazier than my daughter," he amused himself. "Can't wait to get home tonight, a new episode of that reality show, what's its name? Doesn't matter."

The minutes flew through his head and stopped abruptly as he reached the old folks' apartment building. He walked into the mechanically-designed building and shoved the eviction papers into the door guy's face, who simply nodded and waved him by as if he were approving something as simple as a phone call.

6060 stepped into the tiny elevator which barely allowed his wide shoulders to pass. "9<sup>th</sup> floor, here we go." He swaggered to the front door of the eviction victims and did a deafening cop knock.

No response.

"Police, open up!" he huffed impatiently. "Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be!"

A frail female voice answered, "State your business."

"My business is with you and your husband, now open up!" he bellowed.

She looked sadly at her husband of more than thirty years who gave a droopy nod. She slowly opened the door and 6060 stepped in quickly with his gun drawn.

"Oh, there's no need for that," she said softly as she shut the door.

"Tell us what your business is here, son."

He put his gun back on his hip, held up the eviction notice, and told them the rough news.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed and looked at her husband who stood near the sofa on the far end of the room.

"I don't see how this could come as a shock to you. You've received multiple notices from the Bank of His Majesty that you were too far behind on your payments and that this was the next step. I'm just doing my job," the mindless cop said robotically.

The old man's wrinkly face turned defiant and his eyes twinkled with knowledge.

"We won't go!" he shouted. "You don't have the right to do this! My wife had surgery a few months back and we got behind on our payments. Have a heart! No! No! No! You can't do this!"

"I can, and I will," the mind-numbed man in uniform stated heartlessly.

"You have a choice! You don't have to do this!" the old man screamed desperately.

There was no getting through to this servant of the machine. He would justify his actions to the bitter end.

6060 was getting angry. He hadn't expected any resistance. Usually people were quite compliant. Luckily, or so he thought, this old couple wasn't physically menacing, so he felt in control. If they won't go willingly, he'd use coercion. Just doing his job. He approached the old man who stood his ground. The agent of the state took handcuffs off his belt and went to subdue the old timer. Not only did the old man stand his ground, he actively resisted as best he could, struggling mightily against the much larger and younger opponent.

6060 was under the influence of his mind melt pill and was far from his top fighting condition. Because of this, it took longer than normal to subdue the old man. His wife grabbed a knife from the kitchen, and just as the cop was about to succeed in cuffing the old man, she frantically stabbed the cop repeatedly in his back.

6060 fell to the floor, breathing heavily and gushing blood on the black and white checkerboard floor. The old woman screamed and cried with rage. Her battered husband grabbed her and forced her to set the knife down. Panicking and completely out of his mind, 6060 grabbed his pistol with a shaky hand and unloaded a full clip into the old couple. They were murdered as they tried to defend their home.

If this scenario had occurred just a few weeks prior, the end result would have been much different. The old couple had been galvanized into knowing their right to self-defense by that mysterious speech from Will. They took his words to heart. It was something they had somewhat felt deep down all their lives, but never could clearly articulate that truth in their minds until they heard that world-shaking speech.

The next day, 6060 lay motionless in a bright hospital room. He had many deep gashes in his back and had suffered nerve damage. He stared blankly out the window as a gentle rain persisted.

"You're awake," came the familiar voice of his daughter. He turned his neck relatively pain-free thanks to all the numbing dope they'd pumped him full of. His smile was more of relief than of joy.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"All night. You were still sleeping when I went to grab a bite to eat. How do you feel?"

"All things considered, not too bad, I guess."

She approached the bedside and looked at him with pity.

"Physically, mentally, or emotionally?"

"To be honest, I can't feel too much right now, too many pharms. I'm not happy about what happened, if that's what you mean."

"Do you feel guilty about trying to steal some old folks' house, and then when they resisted, you tried to put them in a cage?"

"You've got some nerve!" he yelled. She didn't back down.

"I've got some nerve? You should look in the mirror sometime. Do you have even the slightest twinge of guilt about murdering two people?"

He turned red and gasped, "Murder? They attacked me! How dare you treat your old man like this, especially when I'm still laid up in the hospital!"

A nurse rushed in and worriedly asked, "Is everything ok in here?"

"Yeah, everything's fine," she said, "I was just leaving. Call me when you really wake up and can think straight, ok old man?"

She walked out and never looked back.

## Chapter 63

Divine School Official 9003 stared at the electronic message titled "Will". The television transmission that surprised the world had caught her attention. Something in that message resonated with her. She had always thought there must be a better way, but could never put her finger on it. But who was he? Just a man. What he said had made so much sense, though. Not just in her mind, but in her heart. That message resonated throughout her entire being.

Now she was in a dilemma. She stared at the message on her computer. Should she open it? Where might this action lead? What if the intelligence networks were keeping track of those who initiated correspondence with this so-called "Will"? And who ever heard of a commoner having a name and not a number? Names were reserved for the elite. She was just a number, just like everybody else. If she looked at that message, it could be the beginning of the end. She might lose her job or, worse yet, lose her son.

"Mom, what are you doing?" her son asked as he touched her gently on the shoulder. She turned to him and smiled.

"I was just trying to decide if I should read this message or not. It's a message from Will, you remember that strange man from the television?"

Her son smiled enthusiastically and said that he did remember, and that the man wasn't strange at all. He had made perfect sense.

"You should read it. I'll read it with you!" he exclaimed happily.

She took an enormous gulp of air and agreed.

"Ok, son, let's do it!" She clicked on the message and began reading.

"Thank you for initiating your learning process which will help bring freedom into the world. I imagine that some of you reading this will have apprehension regarding what negative consequences you could face at the hands of your governments for communicating with me. Allow me to alleviate those fears and to assure you that the encryption and transmission methods used are far beyond any capabilities of the government in question. We will now begin looking at Natural Law, which is the law of the universe, or the law of Creation, however you'd like to refer to it. It is the deterministic component of what shapes our experience (the random component of what shapes our experience is Free Will, but we won't focus on that now). A working definition of Natural Law is: Universal, non-man-made, binding, and immutable conditions that govern the consequences of behavior. Natural Law is a body of Universal Spiritual Laws which act as the governing dynamics of Consciousness. We will begin with RIGHT versus WRONG."

A RIGHT is Correct (based in Truth), Moral (based in Natural Law), and actions based in it do not result in harm to other sentient beings.

A WRONG is Incorrect (not based in Truth), Immoral (not based in Natural Law), and actions based in it result in harm to other sentient beings.

Next, we will look at Natural Law Expressions.

LOVE (Consciousness) leads to KNOWLEDGE (Acceptance of Truth) leads to SOVEREIGNTY (Internal Monarchy) leads to FREEDOM (External Anarchy) which produces ORDER (Manifested Good).

FEAR (Unconsciousness) leads to IGNORANCE (Refusal of Truth) leads to CONFUSION (Internal Anarchy) leads to CONTROL (External Monarchy) which produces CHAOS (Manifested Evil).

Please contemplate the TRUTH you have just read. Look at your own life and see if your actions and the actions of those around you are RIGHT or WRONG. You should stop consuming corporate and government media so that your abilities of focus and discernment will be more suited to this task.

If you wish to learn more in the future and take another step towards freedom and away from slavery, respond to this message at any time. I hope to hear from you soon.

Will

## Chapter 64

The message that Will had broadcast to every TV set received mixed reviews, to say the least. The vast majority of people brushed it off, one way or another. There were some who couldn't comprehend the meaning of what was said. Others could see how it might be true, but felt it was impossible to make such things happen in the real world. "People are stupid" or "people don't care" or "not in my lifetime" were excuses people used to convince themselves that inaction was ok. Another excuse used was "I just want to enjoy myself and not worry about it" or "I'm too small to affect anything". Too many excuses and zero reasons.

However, it was a small, minuscule portion of the population who were drawn to know more and to take action, little by little. Curiosity led some, determination others, love, care, courage, and desire were catalysts for all. It was a message which transcended artificial divisions and barriers between race, color, creed, religion, political affiliations, and any and all other superficial splits between people. Why? Because it was the truth, and the truth is for everyone.

It was people like University Student 6060 and Divine School Official 9003 who wept with joy at that message of truth, took it to heart, and initiated their journey by contacting Will. It was small, individual actions such as these that were essential to creating a better future.

## Chapter 65

6 years later

The most destructive war the world had ever seen was finally winding down. With the new technologies came the morbid ability to cause mass death and destruction as never before. Both sides were also evenly matched for the most part. It had taken nearly a year for Hellius to rebuild the air fleet which had been taken down by Will shortly before his departure. Both sides took turns going one step forward and then two steps back, which drew the carnage out much longer. The tipping point came when scientists in the Divine Nation managed to create some armor similar to that of the bulletproof clear skin that was so prevalent on the other side of the world. It wasn't perfect, but it had a high degree of efficacy. The Divine Nation had also managed to produce aircraft faster than their foes.

In the final year of the war, more and more successful air missions were launched into DFS territory. Slowly, more of the DFS came under armed control of Divine Soldiers. A large portion of the DFS lay in ruins because it did not have adequate air defense. The DFS, despite such things being stacked against it, managed to hold out longer than anyone ever expected. They did this not just through determination and grit, but also by crafty sabotage done at strategic points within the Divine Nation. Guerrilla warfare was conducted in certain areas, cutting off supply lines, attacking R&D and manufacturing facilities, and hitting less-guarded points on the ground inside the Divine Nation.

Now the time had come for the final domino to fall. An all-out offensive on the capital city was underway. More than five-hundred aircraft, thousands of tanks, countless bullets, and more than one-hundred thousand mindless soldiers invaded. They received resistance on the perimeter, where the army had a heavy presence. Not much resistance came in the interior of the city, however, due to the lack of military infrastructure there. Most of the citizens were unarmed and didn't resist. Only the police put up any resistance, but were no match for the gargantuan forces streaming into the decimated capital.

Tyran Max dug in for the final act in the presidential palace. There was no point in hiding, and he knew it. He sat in a lounge chair and stared at multiple video feeds from his security cameras on the periphery of the palace. Nothing was out of the ordinary, at least not yet. He knew it was only a matter of time, though. He was also having a nice shoulder rub from one of his ever-changing masseuse staff. Sitting across from him in another puffy lounge chair was an even puffier guy, General Tool.

Tyran grabbed his large glass jar marked "not sugar or salt" and took a strong whiff. He held out the jar to offer it to the general, who looked at it thoughtfully. Normally, he didn't take part in such things, but, he figured, there wasn't much time left, so why not? He grabbed it and took a deep whiff.

Tyran cackled and said, "Whoa, be careful there, General, don't want you having any heart troubles, ya know?"

Figuring he had nothing to lose, General Tool responded defiantly.

"You little pipsqueak, I'm almost happy to die just so I don't have to deal with you anymore." Tyran snatched the jar back and took another whiff.

"Hey General, come on now! We've had some good times together, haven't we?"

"Shutup and look!" the weezy military man yelled at the soon-to-be ousted president as he pointed to the security videos.

Quickly making an approach on all sides of the palace complex, there were a dozen or so black-clad soldiers making mincemeat of Tyran's security guards. These weren't just average soldiers, this was a squad of Special Agent One-Eight-Sevens. These were the elite, only used in certain high-profile situations, such as storming a presidential palace.

"Who do you think they'll shoot first, General?" Tyran asked brashly. "I'll bet you a bottle of whiskey they shoot the girl first," he said enthusiastically.

The girl shrieked but was soon soothed by Tyran's insincere assurances.

"Those guys aren't coming here for anything bad, honey! Don't you worry, they're just coming to join the party."

She calmed down. Why would the president lie to her, right? She wasn't the brightest bulb, to say the least.

"They won't shoot the girl, they'll shoot me first," Tool stated confidently. "They might rape her, but they won't kill her," he continued.

She started crying and Tyran sent her away.

Tyran grabbed his flask and took a swig.

"They should shoot you, General. This is all your fault. Hell, I should shoot you," Tyran said with a maniac's look on his face.

The general scoffed and pulled out his pistol. He slowly stuck it to his head and watched the swiftly approaching special forces team on camera. Then, without a word, General Tool splattered his brains to the four corners. He was quite big-headed, and some fragments caught Tyran in the face.

"Son of a bitch!" he yelled. "Couldn't wait for them to do it?

The door came bursting open and a swarm of One-Eight-Sevens came through like a well-oiled biological machine. They surrounded Tyran Max on all sides. The leader of the pack lifted off his helmet.

"Tyran Max, by the power of High Priest Hellius and the Divine Armed Forces, you are hereby relieved of your presidential duties and the Democratic Free State is now under the divine direction of High Priest Hellius."

Tyran whiffed from the jar again, "Ok, ok, I don't need any long winded speeches. Hell, get on with whatever it is you were sent here to do."

The unquestioning biological android withdrew his gun from Tyran's face, as did all of the squad, and continued, "Our mission is to secure for High Priest Hellius your services." Tyran looked the soldier up and down.

"It sounds like you're offering me a job," Tyran said.

"In a manner of speaking, yes, he is. He wishes you to perform what he termed 'consulting services' for him. If you do not accept, I have orders to shoot you in the face."

"He specifically said in the face?" Tyran mused.

"Yes, in the face, those were his exact orders."

Tyran threw his hands in the air and elatedly yelled, "Since you put it like that, I guess I might as well take that super-vague job you offered there soldier! Sign me up!"

The pack leader gave orders to prepare to secure the premises and move out.

"Just one thing," Tyran said as he cleaned some stray skull fragments from his leopard print silk shirt, "I need to preserve my illustrious legacy, ya know what I mean? Maybe we can arrange for it to look like I died a valiant death, fighting to the last, or something to that effect. Make me look real brave, ya know?"

The lead soldier responded stone-faced, "That's not my department. High Priest Hellius said to assure you that all proper arrangements would be made."

Tyran squinted his bloodshot eyes, nodded, and rattled off in rapid fire, "Yeah, yeah, ok, whatever that means, I'm sure he'll do that. I hope he's not always this vague. That'll be a hard guy to work with, know what I mean? Mind if we bring that little white jar over there? By the way, just out of sheer morbid curiosity, were you going to offer a job to General Tool, too? That would be grotesquely ironic, don't you think?"

The soldier pointed a pistol to Tyran's head and ordered, "Stop babbling!"

The next day, news hit every media outlet with gruesome pictures of the fallen President Tyran Max riddled full of bullet holes. He lay on the palace floor, machine gun still in hand, with a giant flag waving behind him. He was the last man standing. It had been a valiant death for a gallant and courageous leader. Even the media in the Divine Nation put a positive spin on the demise of their hated adversary.

Queen Sitan was amused at the senseless drivel that was pouring out of the TV set in one of her meeting halls. She knew that Tyran was still alive. Number one, he was a valuable source of information regarding the resources, overt and covert, that his government held. Number two, if it could be helped, they never killed any of their own kind. It was an unspoken rule. She shut off the idiot box and turned to more pressing business, the business of war, to be discussed with General Mars, who sat by her side.

"Can you believe people believe this drivel?" she asked in a mocking tone.

The general responded gruffly, "At my age, little lady, there isn't much that shocks me anymore."

In her mind, the pompous queen couldn't believe that the crusty old general was still alive, but she decided not to bring it up.

"It's your show now, General Mars. It's time to strike Hellius, finally, after all these years. We need to strike now, while they're weakened from such a long battle and having suffered so many losses."

The general smiled and tugged his carefully groomed white mustache and agreed enthusiastically, "Do tell, my lady, when did you become such a brilliant strategist?" He continued proudly, "I'll make the proper arrangements and will deliver a swift victory, I can assure you. Shall I use the special weapon, and make it swift and painless?"

The queen laughed malevolently. "Oh, dear General Mars, where's the fun in that? Toy with them for a while and draw lots of blood. We don't want to show our top weapon right off the bat anyway, do we?"

"As you wish," he agreed.

This act of hubris did indeed cost the lives of millions, but not exactly the way Queen Sitan had envisioned. It also caused a great deal of infrastructure damage within the Royal Region itself. General Mars' first move was to try and take over the energy

producing areas of the Divine Region, for without oil, the great flying fleets that General Mars commanded would be rendered useless. General al-Isis was no fool, and knowing the strategic importance of energy production, concentrated a great deal of his defense apparatus around such areas.

Brutal battles raged in the air and on the ground near the oil fields and refineries. More blood ran from those places in those dark times than did oil. More importantly, during these early stages of the war, Hellius and General Israel al-Isis had used some of their R&D funds for something which would pay immediate dividends. They bribed some of the base commanders within the Royal Region itself. A few bases within the Royal Region were left nearly unguarded at specific times. This allowed easy victories for the Divine Forces. One of those bases happened to contain General Mars' most powerful weapon, an aerosolized chemical code named 'YES' which, when breathed in, made its victims completely compliant and unable to resist. Mars had planned, after enough blood had been shed to the King and Queen's liking, to blanket the Divine Capital City with the spray, which would make the invasion a walk in the park. Once in control of the capital, every other domino would fall nearly immediately. But it was not to be. The base which housed the chemical plant and storage facilities had been ransacked by the Divine Forces. In the attack, the chemical was destroyed as was most of the machinery for producing it. This turned the tables and made the war a much closer match than anyone in the Royal Region had anticipated.

A positive effect which came out of the prolongation of the war was that it enabled more time for the hearts and minds of those who were willing to listen, think, learn, and expand their consciousness more of an opportunity to do so. This was due to the fact that most resources and personnel were being employed in the war effort, which left less enforcement capability on the homefront in all regions. Not only that, but the slow spread of the ideals of freedom had, for the first time in history, caused some to refuse the call to military duty.

Each side had its advantages. The Divine Nation had obtained, through the victory over the DFS, a superior naval force. It used this to great advantage, bombarding the coastline of the Royal Region. This kept the Royals engaged in an area in which it was weaker, thus giving a tactical advantage to the Divine Nation. Hellius and his military also had a larger land mass, larger population, and a great amount of natural resources due to its victory over the DFS. However, the Royal Region possessed far superior air power and, more importantly, better air defense of its capital city. This was because the frequency emitter that Will had used to down an entire invading fleet at the touch of a button was now in the possession of General Mars in the capital city. It had a short range of applicability and the best scientists of the region had failed in duplicating the advanced technology, so it was imperative to keep the device in a place of the highest strategic importance. That place was in the capital city, where the Sitans anxiously awaited their crowning moment.

The Divine Nation actually seemed to be gaining an advantage over three years into the war. They were gaining ground on many strategic fronts. This caused alarm in Mason Black's mind. Grudgingly, Mason made arrangements to transfer technology to General Mars which would make victory almost certain.

The Rockatellers wanted desperately to transfer some new weaponry from Operation Black Cat to Hellius. However, they knew that any sudden appearance of such devices on the battlefield would be a dead giveaway that they had turned their backs on their associates. Up until that point, there was only suspicion based on financial dealings, but a direct tech movement would show their hand and doom them to certain revenge from the cabal. It took a few months for personnel to be trained on the weapons' proper use, and when General Mars felt that he had sufficient firepower to go on the offensive, he didn't hesitate.

He started small, with about twenty jets equipped with the special weapon headed straight for the largest oil refinery in the Divine Nation. It was a heavily guarded installation, and Mars thought it would be a good test to see how effective his new machines of death could be. The fleet had an easy victory and took control of the facility, nearly wiping out all of Hellius' defense forces in the area. The weapon had worked perfectly. Essentially, the jets were equipped with rockets that, once fired, could split into multiple projectiles. Not only that, but each projectile could be controlled remotely and change course. So, in effect, once one rocket was fired, it could split up into six separate missiles, all with equal explosive potential. In short, it increased firepower exponentially. The easy victory put the writing on the wall. It was only a matter of time.

Within the next six months, multiple missions of greater and greater size took control of most of the DFS and many strategic points within the Divine Nation itself. Hellius, al-Isis, and the Rockatellers knew the game was over. It was just a matter of going through the motions.

The day finally came where an invasion of the capital city of the Divine Nation was launched. Over three-hundred aircraft, more than one hundred thousand ground troops, and ten thousand tanks stormed methodically into the capitol. It was a heavy-handed attack. The capital could have been captured quite easily with half the numbers. General Mars didn't want to leave anything to chance. He was too practical for that.

Hellius sat with General Israel Osama al-Isis in the Holy Palace Courtyard awaiting their fate. They knew the game was over and within a few agonizing minutes, their reign atop the expanded Divine Nation would come to an unceremonious end.

The general was, as always, puffing rhythmically on his pipe. He was his normal all-business looking self, with everything arranged in its proper place from head to toe. He had decided to die the same way he had lived, never flinching. Hellius was feeling a bit serene, especially considering the circumstances, and had decided to share in the pipe puffing with his top general.

After taking a long, slow puff from his wooden pipe, Hellius, observing the wonders of nature around him, asked, "General, will you fight when they storm in, or will you lay down willingly?" The slender military pragmatist didn't hesitate.

"I won't fire a shot," he said with absolute certainty. "Why did you ask me a question you already knew the answer to?"

Hellius took another strong puff, exhaled slowly towards the sky and answered, "Well said, general. However, do you know how I knew that?"

"I try not to think about such things," the general replied coldly.

Hellius grinned, "Because I know that deep down, deep inside of all of us who have reached this strata of society, we are all cowards."

General al-Isis turned towards Hellius and gave him a cold, icy stare, but didn't say a word. He knew it was the truth. A moment of silence followed.

The silence was then shattered by broken glass, doors collapsing, guns cocking, and the rhythmic pounding of boots on the ground, and in an instant, Hellius and General al-Isis had their heads surrounded by a plethora of guns. The leader of this particular One-Eight-Seven Squad screamed in their faces with delight.

"By order of the Sovereign King and Queen Sitan, you, General Israel Osama al-Isis are granted last words before your execution!"

"I wish to be shot in the back," the general said somberly.

Hellius was moved away and the second in command of the One-Eight-Seven Squad delivered a bullet to the back of the general's neatly arranged black head.

Turning his attention to the former High Priest Hellius, the leader of the squad yelled again, "By order of the Sovereign King and Queen Sitan, you, former High Priest Hellius of the Divine Nation, are ordered to go willingly to an undisclosed location where you will be dealt with according to the King and Queen's wishes. Will you go willingly?"

Hellius looked around at the young salivating soldiers. They were low dogs, just as the ones he had once commanded. Now he was taking orders from them. He knew what the words meant from the young murderous lad. Hellius was being offered asylum. He could live out the rest of his days in relative comfort but would have to disappear from public view to do so.

"I will not go," Hellius said defiantly.

In utter disbelief, the pompous squad leader replied.

"I don't think you understand. There is only one other alternative."

Hellius laughed, "No, I understand perfectly well." He pulled out a pistol from his robe and, before he had the chance to fire it into his mouth as he had intended, his flesh was torn into unrecognizable bits from a rain of gunfire.

## Chapter 66

Most of the world on the dark side of the wall lay in smoldering ruins. The hemisphere had finally been united under one puppet ruler, King Sitan. Now it had come time for planning and setting a timetable for the invasion of the other side of the wall. The oligarchy still did not possess anything capable of tearing the wall down physically, but Operation Black Cat had finally produced space-capable flying vehicles along with an assortment of what they thought to be advanced weaponry.

It was under these historical conditions that the oligarchy met on this, another fateful day in the history of humanity. The meeting was taking place in one of the grand ballrooms of one of Mason Black's picturesque mountain retreats.

Sat neatly in a circle around a finely polished round table they sat-- the Rothsman Brothers, the Rockateller Brothers, Barack Bush, and Trinity and Mason Black. All of them were dressed in their most opulent garments for the occasion.

Mr. Black, as was customary for him, was groomed just so, not a hair out of place. A servant was busily pouring golden champagne into spotless crystal glasses in front of each self-satisfied psychopath. Mason took his glass and stood to address his fellow plotters.

"Gentlemen, this is a momentous occasion. Through our fortitude and tireless efforts, we stand today on the precipice of a brave new world. The path has not been easy, but finally, we have united the three regions and have the technological means necessary to move forward. We can now do what is necessary to obtain the resources from the other side of the planet." He looked around at the attentive faces of his subordinates. Their faces gushed with smug selfishness and self-gratification. He turned to his daughter, Trinity, and gave her a knowing smile before continuing.

"It is with great pleasure that I present to you the new King of the World, King Sitan!" he joyously exclaimed as he pointed to the entrance of the grand ballroom.

All attention turned to witness King and Queen Sitan making a grand entrance, both dressed in their royal best, cloaks, capes, and crowns. Even that damn cat was perched proudly on the king's shoulder. They beamed as they approached their masters and took a place standing proudly next to the round table.

The smug old faces froze with perplexity. A puppet, here, amongst the true dominators? How appalling! What was Mason thinking? Had he gone mad? Eyes jaunted back and forth between the so-called royals and Mason Black.

Mason looked on with twisted pleasure. He smiled and nodded cordially to the king and queen who bowed reverently in return. Barack Bush was the first to voice his displeasure. "What's the meaning of this? We have protocols, Mason. What's this pawn doing here?"

Mason was overjoyed that one of his backstabbers had spoken first. He motioned to the red-faced Bush and encouraged him.

"Please, Barack, perhaps we shall allow our guests of honor to speak their piece?" Then he turned to the dopey looking king and said, "King Sitan, please do us the honor of explaining to the distinguished Mr. Bush here as to the reason for your presence."

"My pleasure," Sitan accepted with a sly grin. He had a different look about him, his demeanor had changed drastically. He had a commanding presence with pure

intellect radiating from his face. This couldn't be the same man, each onlooker thought to himself.

"I have come to inform you all of a very urgent matter which affects everyone in this room, some more than others, some in a positive light, and others, shall we say, in a less than delightful manner."

John Rockateller grew impatient and blurted angrily, "Cut to the chase, what are you getting at? And why are you speaking so coherently? You get a brain transplant or something? What the hell is going on? Mason, this is a deep breach of protocol. Since when do we have our puppets sit in on our meetings? I demand a straight answer, not from this tool, but straight from you, Mason!"

Mason coldly and methodically obliged.

"Very well, John. I will grant you this last wish."

The Rockateller Brothers looked at each other strangely. What did he mean by last wish? Mason continued as his eyes shot lasers into John Rockateller's soul.

"You want to speak of protocol? Could you explain to me how years ago, billions of dollars were mysteriously being funneled to Hellius under your direct oversight? Even more importantly, how did anyone in the Divine Nation have access to our intelligence feed from the other side? Perhaps you would like to shed some light in these dark corners, John?"

John sat stunned and motionless.

"Or perhaps your brother, Darius, would like to explain that one?" Mason fumed as his eyes darted to the energy magnate.

Darius squirmed in his chair as chills shivered his spine.

"I'll save you the trouble. Might I present a hypothesis?" Mason continued as he slowly began to take deliberately slow steps around the table. "You both knew that there was some disunity amongst us as to how to organize the chess pieces for our move over the wall. You intended to take advantage of what you deemed to be a golden opportunity to build your own empire in secret, and when the Divine Nation was victorious, you would have superior technology and Hellius in your pocket, and nobody else could hold sway over him. After a victory over the DFS, you planned to consolidate resources, easily defeat the outmanned Royal Region and have all three regions, via Hellius, loyal only to your family, the Rockatellers. Oh, wait, and Galvin Creedy, I almost forgot our dearly departed friend. But I was lenient with you, you see. Galvin was meant to be an example, but did you listen? No, most certainly not. You actually had the audacity to redouble your efforts. And after all that, it would be a simple matter of taking over all significant corporations and banks by force, leaving the rest of us out to dry. What do you say, gentlemen? Did I hit near the bullseye? Not bad for a simple, spur of the moment guess, right?" he gloated mightily.

Dead silence.

"Short story, long, gentlemen, you are no longer relevant. You attempted to double cross everyone in this room and now you're going to pay a very dear price."

John managed to force some words out of his dry mouth, "You can't just kick us out, just like that. We still hold significant stakes in Point of Light Energy and Liberty Bank."

"Correction," Mason fumed, "You held, past tense, held! As of today, World Corp has bought out a controlling interest. You have been liquidated."

Darius screamed, "And how the hell do you expect to get away with that? We didn't approve of any share sale!"

"I'm glad you asked! Because I control the master computer system for all international banking," Mason gloated. "Now, let's move on to other matters, shall we?"

"I will now ask King Sitan and his lovely Queen to step in and enlighten us as to the next order of business," Mason ordered with bravado. "But first, I'd like to call in two more distinguished guests. Please, bring them in," Mason ordered the champagne server waiting by the door. A moment later Zee Hissinger and Mr. Gray were brought into the fray. Barack Bush thought this to be beyond absurd and let his boss know it.

"What, now we're bringing in the middle men? Why don't we just bring TV cameras in here and broadcast the whole thing, Mason? Damnit, this is too much!"

"Silence!" Mason seethed, "King Sitan and his Queen will explain, and you, Mr. Bush, will listen."

King Sitan began gracefully, "I must now take a moment to thank those who helped the good people of the Royal Region bring unity to a world which had been fragmented for so long. I owe you a debt of gratitude, Lord Bush! Without your most generous financing, none of this would have been possible!"

Bush looked distraught. "I don't know what he's talking about. And when did he learn to speak coherently, anyway? Is this really Sitan, or is it a new clone?"

"Save your pathetic breath," Mason quieted Bush again. "Another traitor, Barack. You had designs of consolidation much the same as the Rockateller boys. You thought you could have it all for yourself! You're a damn fool, is what you are. I will do you the favor of letting you in on a little secret. The lovably dense-minded King Sitan is actually one of the most intelligent individuals in the world. His IQ is in the two-hundred range and, this is the kicker, for without it things might not have fared so well in my favor, he is one hell of an actor. You all really thought he was a disabled monkey, didn't you? Well, surprise, my former associates, surprise surprise."

Bush was puzzled. "But how do you know that?"

"Because I'm the one who sent him to you. He is a clone, no doubt, but with some very extreme upgrades. This was his mission. I knew two things beyond a shadow of a doubt, years ago. Number one, there were some very heated differences of opinion in the ranks as to how to conduct business on the other side of that damned wall. More importantly, I knew that the temptation for some power plays to be made against myself in such a climate of disunity and distrust would be irresistible. So I set a trap, and you fell in. I had to see who I could trust, and who I couldn't. It saddens me, truly, to see so many of my trusted business partners turn their backs on me, it truly does."

"And what about her?" Barack screamed as he motioned to the queen.

"Oh, I almost forgot, yes, our dear lady in red, Queen Sitan. She is also a very special clone as well."

"Both plants!" Bush yelled, horrified.

"Afraid so," the queen joined in.

"I must congratulate the Rothsmans for being the only virtuous and loyal ones of the bunch. However, in light of recent events, I feel it necessary to take more precautions. Although it pains me greatly, I'm afraid that the Rothsman Brothers must be liquidated as well."

"You son of a bitch!" David Rothsman cried. "You think we'll let you get away with this? We can all combine forces and take you down, Mason Black! You and your whole family! This means war!"

"I'm afraid not," Mason rejected.

"And just why not?" Troy Rothsman asked incredulously.

"What time is it?" Mr. Black asked coolly.

"What?" a confused David Rothsman spoke what everyone was thinking.

Mr. Black called over to his servant near the entrance, "What time is it?"

"Five minutes shy of midnight, sir."

"Wonderful, now for my last order of business. I have not yet alluded to why our loyal subjects, Mr. Gray and Zee Hissinger have been brought here this evening. Again, I find it most difficult to trust people these days and have also decided that your services, Mr. Gray and Mr. Hissinger, are no longer needed."

Barack Bush started laughing madly, "You're destroying your entire control apparatus? Now I know you've gone mad! What makes you think that your family and a couple of clones can run the world?"

"An astute observation. There is a simple and beautiful answer. I figured that since the nations were being consolidated and brought under one umbrella, it seemed only logical to do the same at the apex of the pyramid. Now I don't have to worry about any more infighting, which can be so trying. This will be much more efficient and, from my point of view, desirable," Mason gleefully explained. "Time?" he questioned again.

"Two minutes to midnight, sir."

"Any last words from anyone? You've got two minutes."

Everyone looked around the room in panicky disbelief.

"What the hell do you mean?" Hissinger hissed for the last time.

Mason continued, "You've all been poisoned by your last glass of champagne. It's time released, and if everything works as it should, then just about now you should all start feeling light headed. Following that, your stomach should start to burn as if you had a bonfire raging to get out. Mind you, I've never experienced this of course, I'm just reciting what my wonderful servant made me aware of as to the effects. You might be wondering why my servant has such in-depth knowledge of deadly poisons. That's because he's actually Special Forces Agent 187."

Everyone started to desperately gasp for air.

"Oh yes, how could I forget about the shortness of breath?" Mason gloated delightfully as he watched traitors and loyal servants alike flounder to an unceremonious death. The moaning, squirming, and screaming made Queen Sitan uneasy and she looked away. Noticing this, Mason asked, "My dear, are you squeamish? This is our moment of triumph!" He walked over to her, grabbed her head and forced it back in the direction of the desperate bodies grinding slowly to the floor in pain and shock so that she had no choice but to view the horror. "Enjoy the moment," he said softly in her ear.

Mason took a deep breath. He had been waiting for that moment for what seemed an eternity. Now all the power was in his grasp in the hemisphere, and would soon be his in the whole world, or so he thought.

Looking at the King and Queen, he suggested, "We should retire to different quarters, I suppose. We don't need any distractions while we further discuss the business at hand. Shall we?" He pointed the way to an archway which led to another wing of the mansion.

"Actually, sir, if I may have a word before we move on," King Sitan stated cordially.

"As you wish," Mason agreed.

With a malevolent twinkle in his eye, Sitan turned to his queen and asked, "My dearest, would you like to do the honors?"

She grinned ear to ear and said, "It would be my greatest honor." She reached slowly into her diamond-studded purse, looked Mason Black in the eye, said, "Thank you for helping us to achieve so much." She then quickly pulled a black pistol out and emptied the magazine into Mason and Trinity Black. They dropped to the floor with ghostly looks on their faces, stunned with betrayal.

Agent 187 rushed over with gun drawn on the king and queen. Sitan looked at him calmly, pulled out his own pistol and aimed it at the soldier.

"You won't kill us," Sitan stated unwaveringly.

"Why not?" 187 asked.

"Two reasons. Number one, the queen and I are wearing transparent armor. I'm sure you're familiar with it, and I would be willing to wager that you are using some similar protection. Now, we can fire ammo all day and reduce this fine dwelling to rubble, which will accomplish none of our objectives, namely, killing each other. Reason number two is that now your boss is dead, and I invite you to work for me now. If you refuse my offer, I'll be forced to send an entire military unit to eliminate you at a later time. The choice is yours. Work for me now or die in the near future."

Agent 187 thought that he might be bluffing, but thought it better not to test it. He slowly lowered his pistol and backed away.

King Sitan looked at his murderous lady in red, smiled, and grabbed her hand.

"My dear, after all these years." His little victory fawning was rudely cut short by a bizarre flickering of light from nearby.

"What in the devil," Sitan wondered aloud.

The flickering was attempting to focus itself into a coherent picture as they looked around to find the source of the emanation. Finally, a scratchy hologram of David Rothsman appeared upright, with wide eyes, and dressed to kill. The light emanated from the dead Rothsman's head on the blood soaked floor.

"King Sitan, nice to see you again," he said ironically with a malevolent smirk. "You look like you've seen a ghost, both of you! I can assure you, I am no ghost. I am speaking to you live, via this hologram transmission, from an undisclosed location. Questions or comments before I continue?"

Sitan and his scheming wife were caught off guard, but still felt confident that they held the winning hand. The king peered at the dead Rothsman's head and found the source of the transmission coming from between the eyes.

"State your business, whoever you are," he demanded.

"Gladly," Rothsman began almost cheerily, "And you thought you were the only one with tricks up your sleeve. First, I want to thank you. You played a marvelous, although unwitting, role in removing my competition. Now we may move forward together. Allow me to explain."

The king held up a disapproving hand and said, "First, you need to answer some questions."

"As you wish," came the cordial reply as the sketchy transmission caused Rothsman's face to distort a bit.

"Who are you, really?"

"I'm David Rothsman, of course."

Sitan motioned to the dead body before him and asked, "Who is that then?"

"No offense, but for a man with a two-hundred IQ, you're not so bright. Perhaps you've got a case of nerves? Anyway, the bodies of myself and my brother are clones. We have been watching all of tonight's festivities courtesy of multiple cameras embedded in my dearly-departed body double. You don't have access to holographic technology, do you? No, you don't, that's right. So, I am alive and well as is my brother, Troy. We would like to propose a deal to you both. Have I got your attention?"

Sitan laughed at what he thought to be absurd. How could two men from a secret location be any nuisance, much less a threat, to the control apparatus that he and his wife had just cleverly seized control of? It wasn't logical.

"With all due respect, you're not in a position to negotiate, Mr. Rothsman, if that's in fact who you really are." Looking to his vicious lady in red, he asked, "What do you think, my dearest, shall we hunt him down with our dogs? Perhaps we can recruit our newfound employee, Agent 187 to lead the hunt." Then turning back to Mr. Rothsman, he asked, "What do you think, Mr. Rothsman? Shall I release the hounds? You can't hide forever, and you surely can't operate any significant resistance against my freshly consolidated power from whatever godforsaken remote corner you've buried yourself in."

"That's a fascinating hypothesis, but is very far removed from truth. I shall tell you the story of why I am holding the upper-hand and why you would be a fool to reject my proposal."

"I'll humor you," Sitan spoke defiantly.

"I'll be very up front with you. Right now in my possession is an access code, which only my brother and I are privy to. It is the key to unlocking what Mason thought he had secreted away, but he was dead wrong, pun intended. You see, what our cold dead friend there didn't tell you was that he and his family had their own research apparatus, an organization called Darkore. It was financed only by the Black Family and World Corp. and until just a few years ago I was unaware of its existence. This juicy piece of info made other pieces of the puzzle fit together and Troy and I set out to, well, save our skins, more or less. That was the primary objective, but also to take Darkore for ourselves, which has been a tricky endeavor, to say the least. Actually, without your assistance in killing Mason and Trinity, I'm not so sure things would have worked out to our advantage."

"Hold on," the queen said indignantly as her eyelashes fluttered. "This is all quite entralling, but what exactly are you driving at? What is Darkore?"

"I'm glad you asked, my fair lady, and might I say that your dress is absolutely stunning and a perfect choice on such a murderous occasion! Darkore is the most secret research and development facility in the world. It has technology much more advanced than what you have access to, I can assure you. It has an army of robots just waiting to be released, on my command. We got the robot ignition codes a few days ago and changed them during tonight's festivities. Anyway, only the Black Family knew about it, and really only Mason and Trinity were involved. The rest of the family was too busy hobnobbing to care. It was started by Mason and Trinity Black before anyone else in our little ambitious cabal knew about the spying mission to the other side. You see, about ten years ago, the group laying pulse-less before you, along with Troy and I, started an operation called Black Cat. An awful name, I know, and I forget who named it, maybe Creedy, poor sod. Anyway, Black Cat was our group's project, a spying mission to the other side of the wall in order to gather intelligence and to reverse engineer what was found. Once the proper technological level was reached, we intended to invade the other side and take over. However, Mason apparently was a bit paranoid, which he had reason to be, because he sent you two out as bait to try and hook others into going their own route and grabbing all the power for themselves. What happened that no one expected, was that somehow Hellius and Tyran got ahold of the intel feed and tried their own power moves on us. Can you believe that! It was either really ballsy or really stupid, and since they failed miserably, I'd venture to call it quite stupid."

"Anyway," Rothsman continued, "the spying mission was made possible by a pilot from the other side crash landing. Mason was made aware of this by everyone's favorite crusty intel chief, Zee Hissinger. The pilot was held for two years while his craft and gadgets were studied and reverse engineered. He was finally released and allowed to fix his craft and fly to the other side, on one condition, that he drop someone off over there to do the spying. At this point, our group was let in on the plan. A ton of people were studied, analyzed, psychologically evaluated, rigorously tested, and finally, the man was chosen and he was dropped on the other side. The rest is history.

So Darkore had a two year head start on the rest of us, including you there in the Royal Region. When Troy and I noted some highly unusual cashflow in all the regions, including yours, we brought it to Mason's attention. A lot of people had turned on him. We knew it. He knew it. But it went unspoken. He just told us to watch the numbers closer, he sent Trinity to supervise, and he waited. Well, the fact that he didn't take any action, not even after a couple of years of obvious mal intent, Troy and I started to get antsy. It just didn't add up. What was he waiting for? Sure, he had Creedy killed to send a message to the rest, which they didn't heed, but that was it. So we decided to find out. We set up a spy network to get into Mason and Trinity and it didn't take long to find Darkore. Mason was hedging his bets in a huge way! What did take a long time was infiltrating Darkore. So now we are the only ones who can command the robot army and the only people who can access Darkore, except for the scientists, of course.

I might add that the master banking computer that was referred to by Mr. Black earlier is now also under our control. So, short story long, you need us more than we need you. We can put another couple of clones on the throne, you know. However,

we feel that it would be prudent to have someone with your degree of intelligence there. After all, all of our cohorts have been put out of commission tonight, partly thanks to you. We could use you, both of you, to help in the next move on the chessboard. If you refuse, not a problem, we'll just have you terminated and replaced. What do you say?"

The couple looked at each other. Was he bluffing? If he was, it was one hell of a story.

"On one condition," Sitan said.

The hologram chuckled and spoke with hubris, "You're hardly in a position to be setting conditions, but go ahead, I'll humor you."

"You show me Darkore before we make any concrete agreements," Sitan suggested.

The hologram flickered and then agreed.

"We'll bring you there tomorrow. It'll be a grand tour, fit for a king, don't you worry," he quipped snidely. Then the flickering figure disappeared.

## Chapter 67

The Sitans and the Rothsman Brothers came to an agreement on that private tour of Darkore. From that point forward, they worked together synergistically in order to create the reality they envisioned for the future of the planet. Within days, King and Queen Sitan appeared on television and proclaimed themselves rulers of the United Regions. The Rothsmans set to work on further consolidating the financial and industrial sectors while the royals were tasked with consolidating the bureaucracies, militaries, and schools.

The people were weary of war and it was decided to allow them time to rebuild before the inevitable invasion over the wall. Sigmund Bernays had survived the purge and set out to create more games, shows, lotteries, and sports than ever before. New shows were put on TV to acclimate them to new technology, especially robots. The Rothsmans were anxious to use their new high-tech toys but knew that it was necessary to slowly indoctrinate the people into what was on the horizon. A great deal of propaganda was also put out to convince the masses that food, water, and other natural resources were becoming scarce and that they would one day find it necessary to obtain resources from the other side of the planet, by violence, of course. This message was put out mainly in fictional stories, but gradually more overt propaganda was used to make the minds fertile for justification for future wars.

Much had been left in ruin across all three regions. Nearly half the population had been wiped out from the war to unite the regions. A good deal of the mechanized productive capacity had also been pulverized by deafening fireballs.

Simultaneously, while darkness was so evident on that side of the planet, there was cause for great hope in small circles. Divine School Official 9003 and her son were in communication with Will as were others, including University Student 6060. She had taken it upon herself to care for her father after his attack. He was no longer able to physically perform for the police and was stuck at home. Eventually he came to grips with his physical inabilities and his daughter even managed to unlock his mind and free him from his authoritarian shackles. In time, they learned enough to begin teaching others. Eventually, Will had too many students to handle. The rest of Will's crew gladly took it upon themselves to reach out to their fellow beings on the other side. Minds were freed one at a time.

Divine School Official 9003 even started teaching Natural Law in her school, which was in stark contrast to the state-mandated curriculum, to say the least. Within months of doing this, she lost her job. By this time her son was fully grown and she joined him in working in the underground economy. There was now only one official currency, the United Regions Dollar, or UR Dollar. However due to the spread of the contagious message of freedom, an underground economy with various innovative methods of trade was employed. Some people also dared to move outside the cities and become self-sufficient.

These trends of hope were eventually met, as always happens, with opposition from the authoritarian control structure. More laws were passed to restrict freedom of association. "You can't trade here or with that... That's illegal... You can't teach that... You can't even talk about that or the other... You have to be home at a certain

hour... You can only use this amount of such-and-such resource... You need a license for that, etc., etc.; and if you don't obey, we'll send a costumed goon with a badge to your door to beat you into submission. And if that doesn't work, we'll murder you.

As the repression grew, so did the number of people who took the initiative to learn Will's teachings. The pendulum was swinging. Once a great enough number of individuals had been reached and they refused to comply with the control structure, it became necessary for police duties to be delegated increasingly to robots. As the repression grew, some people, including Student 6060 and her father, along with former School Official 9003 and her son, asked for help to get to the other side. Jovius, Tai, and many others flew rescue missions and saved those who wished to escape the authoritarian hell.

Small missions to attack the other hemisphere were also sent out by the control apparatus, at first in secret to just test the waters and see the results. The statist forces were decimated. The first attempt was only a small fleet of five ships. The ships attempted to attack an easy target, a small farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. Looks can be deceiving, and the farmers easily repulsed the attack. It was disheartening for the Rothsmans and Sitan. They felt they were ready after so many years of preparation and such an embarrassing failure frustrated them greatly. However, they didn't get to their level of power by a lack of perseverance. They sent larger and larger missions, all of which ended in catastrophe. Eventually, so many missions had been launched that they couldn't be kept secret anymore. The missions grew to hundreds of ships at a time, all very easily destroyed upon arrival. Messages were sent from Will's side of the world that violence was not necessary, that voluntary cooperation was possible and preferable, but that any future violent aggression would be met with sufficient force to repel, as had happened numerous times before.

Over the years, after so many lives had been lost on fruitless missions, pilots and soldiers of the international military refused to obey orders. In a relatively short time, the Rothsmans and Sitan were forced to use robots to fly the missions. On top of that, technological innovation had come to a standstill, due to the fact that top-down control structures can't innovate. People come out of the schooling system as mechanized function performers, not imaginative creators. Freedom was necessary to create with the imagination, and for these simple reasons, new innovations almost didn't exist under the Sitan regime. In contrast, many new advanced creations had come to be through the innovation of countless individuals on the free side of the wall.

With time, there also grew sentiment, on both sides of the wall, to tear the wall down. However, no individual or group took it upon themselves to do so. Those who possessed the technology to do so, who were on the free side, ultimately decided it shouldn't be done, at least not yet. The prevailing opinion which led to this decision, ultimately was, "When all of the mental walls are destroyed, so will the physical."

Finally, after more than one hundred years of struggle, those who lived in accordance with Natural Law were the vast majority on the side once ruled by malevolence and fear. The descendants of David and Troy Rothsman along with those of King and Queen Sitan were forced to flee. Where they fled, nobody knows. Maybe they went underground, or maybe they went into space. Those who still believed in statism were left without their "leaders" and remained living and battling each other in

small pockets. Now that most minds were freed, people from the white side of the wall began to tear it down, piece by piece. Slowly, more and more individuals felt it was time to do so, and that all living on the planet could live peacefully, without being divided anymore by that mysterious, near-indestructible structure.

"And so we stand here today, at this last remaining piece of the wall, which stands as a monument and a reminder of the mistakes made by the human race in the past. It reminds us of not just the pain and suffering endured by so many generations, but also of how we eventually triumphed over fear," Will the 3<sup>rd</sup> spoke proudly to his children and grandchildren. Will turned his old eyes Heavanward and smiled. In his mind, he thanked his grandfather, Will the First for making the choice to start that journey so long ago which had led to this point, to the creation of a free world.

## About the author

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