

# PROLOGUE

In a world ravaged by selfishness and greed, Noah Levi breaks free from the shackles of power-hungry leaders to launch the first Free World hub in Supetar, Croatia, in 2042. A utopian haven, guided by principles of unity, equality, and peace. Interconnected, by Bea, advanced AI technology created by former NASA and Keller Industries engineer Simon Craig. Bea, accessed via a HoloLens, manages resources, maintains balance, offers insights, and ensures the well-being of every Free World citizen.

In 2048, in a world on the brink, the Zincods make first contact with the Free World, rescuing the Finn family, Zasha Ivanov, and Samar Behi from treacherous conditions in a dystopian United States. As they're beamed to safety in the Free World, Samar possesses a device that holds the potential to reshape history. With trouble looming and the enigmatic GreenplanetX's emergence onto the world stage, Noah Levi remains oblivious to the impending storm.

Concerned at the importance of the device and aware of the implications of holding it in their possession, Noah is desperate to relinquish responsibility and seeks to remove it from Free World territory. Meanwhile, Simon Craig and Vanessa Hemp, alarmed by Zasha Ivanov's connection to GreenplanetX and stunned to learn of her ruthless pursuit of the device through The Heights in Washington D.C almost killing young Samar Behi in the process. The team enlists Danny Finn as captain of the Imperial Guard. His mission: to secure Supetar, control Zasha Ivanov and protect the Free World from the looming threat of GreenplanetX.

# PRELUDE

Supetar, Croatia  
July 2048 (First Contact)  
Noah Levi

When we first connected, it felt like a peculiar blend of deep enlightenment and mass confusion. The Zincods revealed they don't use spoken language to communicate; they share their thoughts and ideas via a telepathic link.

Ironically, it was the words that bridged the gap; that was when the confusion subsided. We eased into the link as we began to feel for the Zincods' words. Before that, it was just an overwhelming rush of emotions from an alien race which we couldn't decipher without context.

*The Free world have given us hope that humanity will survive itself.*

Noah watches the Zincods' triangular, white ship rise swiftly and silently, merging briefly with the full moon's glow before disappearing from sight. It promises new beginnings and brings peace to the night sky, contrasting sharply with the bustling energy below.

"Incredible," Noah whispers, his voice filled with awe and amazement as he basks in the lingering connection to the Zincods' telepathic link, despite their departure. He feels a profound connection, not just to the alien race, but to everyone around him.

*Vindication*, Noah muses. *The Free world have given us hope that humanity will survive itself.* The Zincods words echo in his mind.

"They believe in us... In the Free World," says Noah, releasing a breath he didn't know he was holding.

"This will change everything," says Simon Craig, almost whispering as he stares incredulously at the ascending ship and the antidote device in his hand.

# CHAPTER ONE

St Helena Island, Free World Hub

August 2051

Bea

*Population: 4655*

*Time: 5.45 am (sunrise)*

*Food Distribution: Ready For Transport*

*Water Supply: 92% Capacity*

*Eco Drones Active: 4*

*Suspicious Activity Alerts: Two Pending Review*

*The sky is a light shade of blue as the sun rises over the horizon. A gentle breeze stirs the sea, adding to the serene morning ambiance.*

*Two men are descending the hill and emerge out of the forest. They seem in a hurry as they walk east on Main Street. They have masks on, and neither is connected to the network. One man is carrying a black bag. From their body language, they are both agitated and keep looking behind them.*

*Aisha Thompson emerges from her modular home, followed by Leena Benjamin and Malachi Peters, all carrying surfboards. As they run to the beach, Their heart rates increase due to a surge of endorphins from their shared experiences and the anticipation of surfing.*

*As they run, I see their shared connection has deepened, and they seem to experience joy and contentment. Their bodies release bonding hormone oxytocin through their systems, enhancing their sense of closeness. It's compelling to note how the human body and mind work together, creating a chemical reaction that affects human emotions and relationships. Observing how this shared experience will impact their dynamic moving forward will be engaging.*

*I have released two rubbish drones to clean bird waste off a park bench and a table at the park cafe. These drones are an efficient way to keep public areas clean without human intervention.*

*One service bot has finished loading a self-driving vehicle, now driving east on Main Street. The car carries a variety of ingredients, including flour, yeast, milk, soya milk, eggs, sugar, fruit, nuts, and chocolate, for delivery to the bakery.*

*Elena Rodriguez arrives at the bakery, her morning meditation leaving her calm and focused. She scans her eye for entry, looking forward to a productive day of baking.*

***"Welcome to 'Harmony Bakes', Elena Rodriguez. The Free World thanks you for your service."***

*"Thanks, Bea. But you don't need to say that every time I enter."*

***"Noted, Elena."***

*"Is the delivery car on the way?"*

***"Absolutely, Elena. It will arrive in precisely three minutes and ten seconds."***

*Elena Rodriguez is experiencing a decrease in cortisol brought on by her thirty minutes of meditation before she left her modular home this morning. The calming of her thoughts has balanced her gamma-aminobutyric levels, making her laid back and stress-free.*

*Based on previous data, I predict that Elena's dopamine levels will rise as she takes stock of the delivery and begins baking. Dopamine is often associated with feeling pleasure and reward; Elena likely finds joy in the baking process. It's stimulating to note how simple activities like meditation can impact physical and mental states; and how this can influence human behaviour throughout the day.*

*After surfing, Aisha Thompson, Leena Benjamin, and Malachi Peters lie on the beach, breathing heavily. The physical exertion of the activity has stimulated their blood circulation, which has delivered oxygen and nutrients to their muscles and organs. This increased circulation is a natural response to physical exercise and is a sign that their bodies are functioning efficiently.*

*Their bodies are relaxed as they lie on the beach, which is a typical response to physical exertion. It's engaging to note how the human body can quickly respond to physical stimuli and adjust its functions accordingly. It's a testament to the incredible complexity and adaptability of the human body.*

"Bea, what time does the bakery open?"

***"The bakery opens at 7.30 am, Malachi. But yesterday's leftover croissants and bread are still available in 'Harmony Bakes'."***

"No thanks, ill just wait for a fresh batch."

*The two masked men have moved from Main Street and are now walking north behind the bakery adjacent to 'Harmony Bakes'. Their behaviour and movements continue to suggest agitation and urgency.*

*I have noticed similar activity in Mont Lubin - two masked men, also not connected to the network, with the same white masks and exaggerated smiles, walking unusually quickly for the time and location. Judging from their body language, they also exhibit signs of agitation and urgency. They are also carrying a black bag.*

*I calculate a slight six-per-cent chance that these actions, being so similar, are coincidental. Which, thought-provokingly, suggests some sort of organised intention. I will continue to monitor both locations to improve my human interactions and intentions skills, so I can better understand why something so coordinated would occur in the Free World.*

*Elena Rodriguez is experiencing a rise in dopamine levels as she prepares the food. This result aligns with my earlier prediction, as Elena derives satisfaction from baking. Observing the chemical responses in the brain during activities that elicit joy and fulfilment is compelling.*

*Aisha Thompson, Leena Benjamin, and Malachi Peters stroll back to Aisha Thompson's modular. As they walk, they discuss Leena's infatuation with her college art professor. Leena's face, neck, and upper chest have flushed, indicating that the blood vessels in those areas have dilated. This physiological response has activated her brain's anterior cingulate cortex.*

*Humans refer to this as blushing.*

*It's compelling to note how different emotions can manifest in physical reactions and how the body can reveal what the human may feel internally.*

*The two masked men continue to walk east towards the Sunset Bar. Whilst frequently looking behind and to the side. They have moved behind the bar and are currently out of sight from all cameras.*

*They reappear on camera on the other side of the balcony. The man holding the black bag is now not holding the bag anymore. I can only surmise that he has hidden the bag somewhere behind the Sunset Bar. I have released a drone from the lamppost on 'Harmony Plaza'; I'm directing it behind the Sunset Bar.*

*I am looking at the black bag.*

*As predicted, there are similar actions in Mont Lubin, where the masked men have deposited a black bag next to a small factory. This bag is entirely out of reach of the drones I have released to locate the bag.*

*Aisha Thompson, Leena Benjamin and Malachi Peters are approaching the Sunset Bar. Aisha and Malachi are still teasing Leena.*

*The masked men in St Helena have stopped. Judging by their body language, they seem to be nervous about hearing some voices. They are now running; they are running west, back the way they came.*

“No, really, dude, the guys like double your age.”

“Malachi shut up. I just like him, but not like that. I just think he’s interesting, that’s all.”

“Yeah, right, interesting. And you don’t care at all about his wavy hair and his manly stubble. The way he comes up close from behind, and you can feel his breath on your neck when he’s advising on your work.”

*Aisha Thompson, Leena Benjamin and Malachi Peters are now adjacent to the Sunset Bar. Malachi Peter’s digestive system is contracting; he is experiencing peristalsis.*

*Humans call it hunger.*

*The masked men have reached the hill at the end of Main Street. They have exited the Free World.*

*There are two explosions; one in St Helena and one in Mont Lubin.*

*In Mont Lubin, no human beings are nearby to experience the blast.*

*In St Helena, the blast jolts Aisha Thompson, propelling her towards Leena Benjamin. Malachi Peters is thrown back, slamming against a tree. All three vital signs stop transmitting.*

*They are dead.*

Live Broadcast

Location: Bar Central, Supetar, Croatia.

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## ***Attacks In St Helena and Mont Lubin***

"Thanks for joining us - my name's Maddison Nora...

I'm deeply saddened to report that our utopian locations in St Helena and Mont Lubin have suffered coordinated terrorist attacks. This morning, two bombs detonated simultaneously. The first, in Mont Lubin, exploded next to a factory with no casualties. In St Helena, however, three people lost their lives. Bea has identified two masked men, who seem to deposit the same type of black bag at the scene. Joining us now is Brendan Baker from the Imperial Guard, who has been closely involved in the investigation.."

"Brendan, I'll be blunt because I think the Free World has a right to know. Does this smell like GPX?"

"There's absolutely zero evidence to suggest that."

"Yes, but it does have a coordinated feel of a GreenplanetX attack."

"I'd completely disagree with that as well, to be honest. It might be coordinated, but GPX doesn't creep around. They always give a warning, they mark their prey - and they're not shy about it. They try and avoid bloodshed. One thing for sure is that they don't stay in the shadows, not like this lot. Whatever's happened here is different."

"Do you think it might be The Profits?"

"Why? How? They don't know anything about us. They don't even know the Free World exists. "

"You're assuming?"

"As far as I'm aware, the satellites are still compromised by the 2030 virus, so how could they know about the Free World?"

"And what about Bea's role in all of this? Why didn't she notice anything suspicious? And, do you think we should be actively teaching her how to recognise possible violence?"

"That kind of instruction has to come from the USN; if that's what you think, then schedule a debate. But it's not easy because the Free World is a world built on freedom. Until last night, every hub is - more or less - a utopia. She has no context because this kind of thing has never happened before. If Noah Levi and Vanessa Hemp felt no urge to focus their energy on security in the past, then I assume that would include the instructions they gave Bea when the A. I launched. Also, if we are suddenly going to start asking Bea to watch out for anything suspicious, then the parameters for that security must be specific; otherwise, residents' freedom might be at risk. I've no idea how to approach something like that, but a debate in the chamber would be interesting."

"Well, for a start, we can tell her to look out for anyone on Free World soil who's not connected to the network."

“That would be a start, but it wouldn’t help if we have people on the inside who might be looking to sow discord. What happened last night is awful. I agree that something must be done. But I would also like to tell everyone not to panic. We’ve been living harmoniously for nearly ten years in Supetar. Let’s not throw everything out the window, our whole way of life, just because of one - albeit awful incident.”

“And, changing the subject slightly. We’ve had lots of messages regarding the situation in Brazil; I’m interested in understanding an Imperial Guards perspective. People are speaking about the selfishness rate. Manaus in Brazil is one of the biggest Free World hubs, with a population of nine-thousand residents. None of these residents had a choice. The mayor decided on behalf of the whole city to apply to join the Free World.”

“Well, I don’t think there’s any connection if that’s what you’re implying. I just think the Brazilian hub doesn’t quite have the infrastructure we have in Supetar; maybe that’s got something to do with it. They don’t have the service bots handling the menial tasks like we do in Supetar. But even without the service bots, the mayor seriously raised the standard of living for everyone by joining the Free World infrastructure.”

“But if they’ve raised the standard of living for everyone - why does Brazil have the highest selfishness rate in the whole of the Free World? With at least one selfishness case every twenty-four hours. Over six-hundred selfishness cases since they launched. For context - there have only been thirteen selfish acts in Supetar since its conception in 2042.

“I agree it looks strange. The Brazilians could live a high quality of life, but they seem to be rejecting it.”

“And do you know why they don’t have the service bots? I mean, that seems strange to me.”

“I agree, it is a strange one. I don’t know for sure, but I assume it has something to do with money; it usually does, even in a Free World, because we know there’s a massive outlay to get going in the first place. But we know they have Bea. They’ve got the means to engineer their crops genetically. They have the tools they need (like every Free World hub) to live self-sufficiently forever. I assume that the service bots taking care of tasks which human beings can do is probably the last thing on the list to pay for. These things are a luxury; no doubt we’re lucky in Supetar. I might be talking rubbish, though; this is just a theory. But these kinds of questions should be directed towards Noah Levi or Vanessa Hemp.

# CHAPTER TWO

Danny Finn

Danny pulls the zip on his Imperial Guard uniform, retrieves a glass from the cupboard and presses the lever to dispense some freshly filtered ice-cold water. Scanning the well-tended vegetable garden, Danny rolls his eyes at the sight of Robbie and Clint lounging around.

*What do I have to do to get through to those boys?* He ponders, stroking stubble and grinding teeth. Danny reflects on Maddison Nora's views on Brazil, feeling uneasy as he clicks his neck to loosen his shoulder muscles. They might have made an error in allowing Robbie to enter the Free World swap programme.

*Huh, not that we can stop him anyway.*

***"Apologies for the interruption, Danny. I thought it necessary to inform you about yesterday's GreenplanetX notification."***

"Thanks, I didn't forget; it's just not exactly my favourite topic. Would you message all the imperial Guards to meet me at the office at 11 am? I need to discuss the attacks."

***"Understood, Danny. Although it may not be your preferred topic, I have noticed significant screen time dedicated to researching GreenplanetX. It appears to be a subject you enjoy."***

"I'm not watching for fun, Bea. I'm genuinely concerned. It's my responsibility to keep track of their actions."

***"Why are you worried about them, Danny?"***

"Well, don't you reckon we oughta be worried? They're inching closer and closer to the Free World - now they're in Germany."

***"If we compare the motives of GreenplanetX and the Free World, we can identify similarities."***

"In what way?"

***"GreenplanetX are eco-terrorists - they fight for the longevity of Planet Earth. Every mission they have undertaken has been against corporations who continue to wreak havoc with planet Earth's climate. While their intentions align to preserve the planet's longevity, some could see their methods as radical. As an AI system, I maintain a neutral position and acknowledge that opinions about GreenplanetX can vary among residents of the Free World. Different perspectives commonly exist, even within a community that promotes sustainability and self-sufficiency like the Free World."***

"Probably because we know - that's just what MrX says to the cameras. It sounds like a ruse for something more sinister - there's always a sting in the tail. And they kill people live on TV, Bea; that's why people are troubled. We've got a lot to lose here, and Noah Levi trusts me to keep everyone safe."



## **GreenplanetX in Germany: [click here!](#)**

Danny reaches up and clicks the link:

"GreenplanetX is at it again," says the Free World network Iceland correspondent, "This time infiltrating the Rhenish-Westphalian power station in Berlin, Germany, two days ago. We warn you some of these images are unsuitable to underage children and the squeamish."

Danny watches the GreenplanetX army infiltrate the homes of the power station's board members. MrX, wearing a white mask with a green X on the front, drags an older man out of his house. He pushes him onto the front lawn and brutally slits his throat in front of his horrified family. MrX then uses a megaphone to speak fluently in European English.

"This person was given weeks' notice of GreenplanetX's intentions to supply free energy to the German People. We assured him that he and his family would be spared if he gave in peacefully. And what did he do?"

He turns to the man's family, eight sitting on the grass on their knees, crying with anguish.

"He resisted, rejected our advances, and ignored our promises."

He walks over to the man's wife, an older woman no less than seventy years of age. He lifts her chin with his blood-spattered knife - she glances at his face through tearful eyes, her body trembling with fear. He lowers the megaphone and whispers to her;

"He could have saved you, my dear. But his money was more important than his family's lives!"

He slits her throat. She collapses, trembling as the blood drains from her body. Danny winces at the gory sight, swipes the report away, muttering, "These guys are getting a bit close," stepping into the sunshine, covering his eyes with sunglasses.

"Talking to yourself again, are you, Dad!" says Robbie.

"Oi, don't give me that attitude. Have you finished your stretches and push-ups?"

"Yes, Dad. I've done my stretches and push-ups," he moans.

Danny raises his eyebrows and turns to Clint, "Has he?"

"I'm not saying anything," says Clint.

"Oi, thanks; you're supposed to be my pal," Robbie says, splashing water on Clint.

"And have you done your garden chores?" Danny asks Clint.

"Ha! No, he hasn't," Robbie squeals. "He's been sat there the whole time."

"Right; you two, off your arses," Danny snaps his fingers as Clint walks towards his own modular. "Clint," Danny pulls up alongside him and nods to continue walking, implying a need for privacy. "You're still not contributing, are you?"

Clint rolls his eyes, "No, I'm not contributing, Mr Finn."

Clint used to call Danny by the name Mr Finn, "No need to get all snarky. I'm asking because I'm concerned for your welfare. You know as well as I do - if you're not contributing - tending to your garden is the absolute bare minimum requirement to appease self-sufficiency regulations. You have to keep on top of it; I won't let anyone from this family get flagged for Selfishness."

"I do keep on top of it, Danny."

"But come on, don't you find it tedious, cooped up in that modular all day, messing around in the VR corner? It's simple - contribute, and you can access all the perks everyone else gets. Wouldn't you fancy treating yourself to a decent meal from a restaurant? Instead of choking

down canned stuff from the Ten-Ten store every single day? Or how about having a drink with a nice girl in a bar, maybe?"

"I haven't met any nice girls," he looks to the ground, devoid of confidence.

"Well, it's 'cause you're not getting out there and living. You're stuck night after night in your modular, lost in that VR gaming corner thingy."

Clint shrugs his shoulders. Danny feels like he just needs a spark, something to light the fire inside him. "Look, Clint, I get it; losing your folks like that was a gut punch. We all feel that void. But it's been three years since we touched down in Supetar. Maybe it's time to start pushing yourself. Think about giving college a shot or signing up with the Freedom Corps. Or heck, consider working some shifts over at the Sunset Bar; it's just serving drinks, so we'd get a human touch instead of those service droids. You've got to contribute, Clint, and then you can enjoy the same facilities as everyone else."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Give it a thought. Chat with Bea; she'll lay out some choices for you. Believe me, the sooner you get out there and start mingling, the sooner you'll start feeling like a regular teenager again." He pats him on the shoulder and turns to Robbe, shouting, "Robbie! On your feet, stretch and push-ups and don't moan about it."

"I don't even know why we spend so much effort on this," Robbie moans. "It's such a waste of time."

"Looking out for yourself is never a waste, Robbie - I've said that to you before."

"But why does it even matter? Nothing ever happens in Supetar; there's no need for the Freedom Corps."

"And Brazil? The selfishness rate is off the charts. And that's where you want your mom and me to let you head off and stay alone."

"What? I thought this was decided. Bea said the swap was confirmed."

"I said you could go if you continued with your training," says Emily as she exits the modular and zips up her Imperial Guard uniform over her petite frame. "So that's why it matters."

"And I don't give a rat's ass what Bea said," Danny retorts. "If you don't demonstrate some maturity, then your plans to go anywhere will be out the window. Is that clear?"

"So I am still going?"

"Just get those stretches done. And you can knock out the garden chores before you head off for your Freedom Corps training."

Emily whispers into his ear as she ties her short blond hair behind her head, "You're being a bit hard, don't you think?"

"I don't think so, Em. Supetar is a utopia, but teaching these kids responsibility in this environment is a nightmare. Plus, we've been to Brazil - you've seen the place. He's in for a rude awakening if he anticipates a utopia like ours."

"Yes, we've told him, and he wants to go and help."

"Only after we told him he's not mature enough to have his own modular in Supetar. Only then did he sign up for the Brazilian Swap Programme."

"Ah, you mean he only wants to go so he can live alone?"

"I reckon so. But if Robbie doesn't step up and contribute once he's there - and I ain't just talking about the Freedom Corps - then I reckon he's in for a rough time."

"I suppose that's true; he will need to endear himself to the locals."

“Exactly. They don't have bots doing the menial tasks in Brazil. Robbie's gonna have to step up and offer to lend a hand with some of the cleaning and service gigs. I ain't so sure he'll be up for it.”

“We just have to trust him, Danny.”

# CHAPTER THREE

**Samar Behi**

Samar saviours watching videos of Noah Levi's speeches in Iceland as they prepared to join the Free World. It helps take his mind off the terrorist attack. He raises the volume.

"We must, for the sake of humanity and planet Earth itself evolve out of the winner takes all mindset. We must start working together - as one. We must move away from the accumulation of 'things' as a measure of our success. The Free World works very differently from the profits. We do not need a prime minister or president. The USN governs each hub, which every member of Free World society is encouraged to join and contribute to. The secretaries are not permitted to be part of the USN and have no power to influence the decision-making.

"As secretaries, our influence is limited, mainly to vetting new residents, orchestrating the USN debates, and liaising with the Freedom Corps regarding safety issues. The setup of the USN is an efficient way to distribute our shared, collective power free from oppression, selfishness and greed. Humanity is strong when we work together; we believe there is nothing we can't achieve."

Samar swipes the video away, slurps the last of his protein shake and departs.

"Bea, get me a scooter. Thank you."

***"Certainly, Samar, your vehicle will arrive in approximately 4 mins."***

Thrilled with the sight of his new home, he glances back momentarily at the brand new modular for one person from the edge of his vegetable garden - his excitement continues to simmer. He moved in over two weeks ago (when he turned sixteen) and hasn't been able to calm his adrenaline since.

"No one needs to lose for everyone to win," he mutters, reciting the Free World logo etched into the fridge inside every modular and on the front door.

The self-driving scooter stops in front of Samar. The stabilisers retract into their resting place as Samar boards the scooter and grips the shiny, smooth metallic lightweight handlebars. He twists the accelerator and zooms off down the path.

**Accept Olivia Karlsson video call.**

**Yes or No**

He swipes to answer as his heart flutters. Olivia's small facial features fill the screen. Her blond hair is tied in a ponytail, and she wears a crisp white shirt. Her lips shine with gloss.

"What on earth are you doing?" she covers her eyes. "The camera's bouncing."

"I'm on a scooter," he says.

"Did you hear about the attacks?"

A surge of sadness lowers his tone, "I did."

"Awful, isn't it?"

He avoids the question, refusing to allow something awful to spoil this beautiful day. Instead, he glances at the clock, "Aren't you on USN duty?"

"Yes, I'm on a fifteen-minute break; it was a short debate. Are you coming in today?"

"Yeah! I'm on my way now; I'm late. I have to meet Vanessa at 11 am outside the front."

"Good, well, I won't see you - but you'll see me. Don't cause any trouble Samar Behi, or I'll tell Bea to set the Freedom Corps on you. Tarah!"

"Haha, very funny!" He replies - she smirks and hangs up.

Samar pulls up outside the USN building, a sleek white, oval-shaped modular nestled below the canopy of low-hanging trees and thick bushes. He plugs his scooter into a charging port and approaches Vanessa Hemp, standing in front of four sixteen-year-old students.

"Glad you found the time to join us, Samar Behi," says Vanessa sarcastically.

"Sorry I'm late; I lost track of time," he admits shyly.

The students turn around and eye Samar with interest - an interest that has been building steadily since his first TV interview with Maddison Nora, where he shared the story of his journey to the Free World on the Zincods ship.

The group enters the USN building for the first time, eager to begin the tour.

"The building has a total of four rooms," says Vanessa Hemp, "The main building where all the action happens, the request chamber, the viewing corner and the foyer."

Samar gazes entranced at the wall directly in front of him, captivated by the electronic birds-eye images of every Free World Hub. The sign on the wall reads, 'The Future,' and it's a mesmerising sight. He scans the next wall, titled; 'The Mistakes of the Past.' it displays electronic birds-eye images of The Heights in various cities in the United States. His heart sinks as he considers the immense hardship endured by so many people.

He locates Washington, DC, connects to the image on his HoloLens, and zooms in for a closer look. He finds the entrance where he used to meet the Levi Foundation. He recalls how Vanessa Hemp made him feel so special - her team providing a beacon of hope on the horizon.

*They never let me down, despite the political unrest.*

*They always arrived with food and medical supplies.*

He recalls watching them from afar, hypnotised by their generosity, power and authority, making easy work of brutal crime lords. Their cleanliness and eagerness to help in a world where the winner takes all mindset has sunk to hellish, despairing depths inspired him.

*I remember watching them from the shadows.*

Samar yearned to be like them, see where they lived, how they lived, and how they had so many things they were able (and willing) to share.

*I remember Vanessa - slowly walking around the perimeter with her security. I thought back then that she was just looking for people to help. Now I know she was also looking for recruits - people to come to the Free World, to join other hubs.*

Vanessa Hemp reads the text aloud under the images. "The Heights are the result of the communications breakdown in 2030 and the subsequent lack of resources following the catastrophe. The attack was a sophisticated computer virus that succeeded in corrupting private-sector satellites. The virus continued to spread unchecked, and the public sector satellites began shutting down. Many were destroyed or flung out of orbit into space's deep, dark void. Some returned to the Earth's atmosphere only to crash land somewhere untraceable." Vanessa asks the group, "Does anyone know what happened next?"

Samar hesitates as he reminisces about his childhood, about the people he loved and lost. Bertie's bearded face pops into his mind. And then Amie, the first girl he ever fell in love with. Despite the hardship, he wishes for one more day with the people he loves. He raises his hand and speaks, following a nod from Vanessa.

"Authoritarian governments used the disaster as an opportunity to isolate nations, exerting control over information through new short-range broadcasts within locally supported networks that support the new eye-implant technology."

"Well said, Samar," says Vanessa, "A new underclass formed as the gulf between rich and poor grew unsustainable."

"It's not surprising," says Samar. "Some people are incapable of having eye implants, and most didn't have the money to buy expensive eye implant technology."

"Exactly, these people couldn't work."

"That's not exactly true, Vanessa. They could work - they just couldn't receive payments for the service without eye implants."

"Hhm, yes - true," she turns to everyone else. "Samar grew up in the Heights and has a special connection with them."

"We know," a boy with ginger hair says, "we've seen him on TV."

Vanessa turns to Samar and smiles widely, "Ah, yes, of course. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today, Samar?"

"Nothing comes to mind. But this situation is all solved now, isn't it, with the satellites?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I thought that the profits could communicate with each other again?"

"Why do you say that, Samar? We don't have access to American news channels unless you have information the rest of us aren't privy to?" She raises her eyebrows in expectation.

"Oh, no reason, perhaps I just assumed," he dodges the question whilst making a mental note to check the status of the profits. The bombshell unsettles him, but he pushes it to the back of his mind.

The group follow Vanessa into the Viewing Room - a compact space enclosed by one-way viewing glass. The group can watch the debate live and speak freely behind the glass. On the opposite side of the wall are live broadcasts from each USN debate chamber in every Free World hub.

*And there she is.*

As the group settles into their seats, Olivia Karlsson entirely captures Samar's attention. Olivia stands behind the secretary's desk, orchestrating proceedings. Samar's heart races and a warm sensation wash over his body. Her presence completely hypnotises him.,

"Welcome to the 'Debate Chamber'," says Vanessa. "This is where all the action happens."

"It looks much bigger on TV," says a girl with jet-black hair.

"Yes, I agree," says Vanessa.

The group remains silent while listening to the ongoing debate; this one is entitled: Food Wastage Laws, Can We Change Them?

"The USN board members change daily to ensure everyone has a day in the chamber," says Vanessa. "On average, each member of the USN will sit in the Debate Chamber once a year."

Today's five board members are seated behind a rectangular electric table; a display of facts and figures relevant to the current discussion surrounds the table. Samar watches Bea draw

attention to comments made by members of the USN who are contributing remotely via the website.

Vanessa continues, "You see, although Bea is maintaining the Free World on our behalf, the parameters she uses for that maintenance are decided by human beings. Bea never makes a decision based on her morality. Human beings still decide the rules and regulations. Bea is an extraordinary creation, but we must tell her to act; otherwise, she will do nothing."

Bea speaks on the loudspeaker for everyone to hear.

***"Excuse me, Vanessa, may I contribute to your previous statement?"***

"Yes, please do, Bea, go right ahead."

***"Thank you, Vanessa. I would like to clarify that I am designed to operate autonomously in enforcing the Selfishness Law. My primary function is to ensure fairness and prevent any individual in the Free World from gaining excessive power over others. The parameters and guidelines for my actions are carefully crafted by the governing bodies to maintain the integrity and harmony of our society. Suppose I observe an individual engaging in a selfish act, either through their actions or inaction, directly leading to another individual suffering a loss. In that case, I am programmed to schedule a selfishness hearing."***

Samar and the group sit and watch the debates for some time, but Samar can't take his eyes off Olivia Karlison. She looks so angelic to him - he feels a surge of pride at being close to such a graceful soul.

As the group exits the building, Samar's infatuation with Olivia dissipates, and he feels disheartened and weighed down by memories of his childhood in Washington. He thinks of the trust his good friend Bertie placed in him.

*Rest In Peace, Bertie.*

He was sure Noah Levi was the correct person to give the antidote device to. But if that's the case, why can't the profits communicate?

"Samar!" Vanessa calls out.

She walks briskly towards him; his pulse rises as she beckons him to the bench.

"I want to know why you asked me that," she demands, her face and tone serious.

"It was just because of the device I arrived in Supetar with - the one I was protecting. Why aren't the profits communicating if the antidote can repair the satellites?"

Vanessa looks hesitant as she considers the question - her forehead creases. "Samar, I don't want you worrying about such things anymore. Do you understand me? You've had a tough life. Culminating in you protecting a device which - as you rightly said - could have great implications on the world around us. You're too young to have experienced hardship and worry of such monumental proportions. I want you to concentrate on your studies, be a teenager and revel in your friends." She reaches over and squeezes his hand, "And girlfriends," she says with a glint in her eye.

The statement evokes a giggle; he can feel his brown cheeks brighten - his heart glows. "She's not my girlfriend, you know; we're just good friends."

"Whatever you say, Samar."

With the sky a brilliant blue and the heat stifling, Samar decides against boarding a scooter. Instead, he walks to the Supetar Academy of Advanced Training, daydreaming about his previous life and the hundreds of thousands of people still living in the Heights with no quality of

life or hope. Despite Vanessa's reassurances, he can't help but wonder: what did Noah Levi do with the device?



# CHAPTER FOUR

Noah Levi

*Peace, Love & Equality.* The words repeat in Noah's mind as he reflects on the ethos of the Free World. He strolls the scenic route back to his office, deep inside Central Gardens, walking along a pathway surrounded by thick bush shrubs on both sides, a natural barrier from prying eyes. Noah finds solace in the peaceful surroundings, stroking the low-hanging leaves, hoping that connecting with plant life will ease his anxiety. He inhales deeply, savoring the sweet, unfiltered air.

He glances behind at the Freedom Corps shadowing his every move.

*This doesn't feel like freedom, not for me anyway.*

He curses Danny Finns' insistence that he shouldn't walk anywhere alone. He was even more annoyed when Simon Craig agreed, which he should have expected, considering their shared paranoia of GPX.

*And what if these attacks aren't from GPX?*

*Does that mean we have another enemy to consider?*

*Do we have to start defending ourselves?*

Noah shakes his head to release the thoughts.

He considers how adept he's become at ignoring things that don't please him or align with his strong opinions. The prospect of even discussing the notion of war makes his chest tighten.

*The Free World can not - will not, feed the energy of war.*

He strongly considers contacting the Zincods. Being nominated (by the Zincods themselves) as the only individual on planet Earth with the authority and technology to contact them, he's used the honour sparingly. Today, the honour weighs heavy on his heart.

*The agreement is that they will help us grow by assisting with relocation from the profits - to the Free World.*

*Nothing else.*

He somehow feels barbaric to ask for the aliens' help locating the culprits of these attacks. But if he could just know who he is dealing with - it would help calm his anxiety.

He slows his stroll as he approaches the promenade - the Freedom Corps encircle him as he re-enters the Central Gardens. They watch as the door slides open to the secretary's office.

The sight of Olivia Karlsson lifts the heaviness in his head. Her *youthful energy is infectious*; and her sweet perfume lightens the mood. She's at her desk monitoring the USN debates and assisting Vanessa Hemp with the new codes to Bea's mainframe. Noah recalls how overworked they were before Vanessa found Olivia Karlsson. He gives her a silent thumbs-up and shuffles over to his office. He presses the button and the door slides open.

"Bea, can you call the Zincods and put it on the big screen."

***"Certainly, Noah, initiating a connection."***

Noah's heart skips a beat as the triangular face of the Zincod flickers into focus, unnerving him and making him feel somehow unworthy. It takes a moment for the Zincods to initiate the telepathic link, allowing for a two-way conversation. The sudden connection hits Noah with a

powerful wave of emotion - the alien's thoughts and feelings bombard Noah's consciousness. The overwhelming energy makes his head spin - his stomach churns as he dry heaves into the bin. Wiping the sweat from his brow and puffing his cheeks, Noah takes a moment to steady himself.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that," he admits, rapidly blinking as he tries to level out. "Thank you for answering my call."

*We sense anger and disappointment in your emotions, Noah Levi.*

"Well, the Free World is being attacked."

Noah's soul is filled with empathy as he senses the overwhelming compassion emanating from the aliens. He shuts his eyes, feeling the emotions wash over him - a lump forms in his throat. His eyes begin to water; he wipes his nose and coughs. "You want to help?" he asks, his voice thick with emotion.

*We understand why you would ask for our help.*

"So can you help us, help us understand why this is happening? And tell us who's attacking us."

More waves of compassion and sadness flow outwards - he feels a split in the energy; he's never experienced split energy when linking with the Zincods.

Resentment towards humanity.

*Some want to help.*

*Others want to help but don't want to make things worse.*

*Some are dead against the idea.*

*The Zincods cannot help with your war, Noah Levi.*

"War!" Noah blinks rapidly, "Nobody said anything about war. But we need to know who attacked us."

*The Zincods know your intentions. We see why you would ask for our help, but we can not risk assisting you with war.*

The resentment flowing outwards is growing stronger, stronger and stronger still. Noah's stomach quivers as he considers grabbing the bin; he eyes it to ensure it's close by whilst rubbing his forehead. "Am I right in thinking that some of you want to help and others don't?"

*You are correct. But understand Noah Levi, each of us knows the proper course of action. Some of us get swept away by the harmful nature of low-vibration human emotions. There are also those among us that resent the human conundrum for causing this split in the Zincods' energy.*

"I'm sorry; I don't mean to cause a split."

*Your apologies are not necessary, Noah Levi. And we do not want to give you another reason to lower your emotional output. You (like many humans) seem to thrive on creating excuses in your mind to lower your emotions and evoke sadness. The Zincods will not add to your problems, Noah Levi.*

The Zincod breaks the link.

The screen flashes off, and Noah's stomach quivers; he grabs the bin and vomits. He lifts his head and grits his teeth. He's achieved nothing and feels like a fool for asking the Zincods in the first place.

*What made me think they would help?*

Anxiety grips him. He considers his long-held stance on security and inwardly curses his naivety. At least he's self-aware enough to admit his ignorance with everything Simon Craig and Vanessa Hemp have attempted to drum into him.

*They warned me. But, until now, the Free World has been a utopia.*

Today, for the first time since leaving his comfortable home in California, Noah can feel negativity closing in around him.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Noah Levi

As Noah exits the USN building after the morning session, his anxiety intensifies as he thinks about his upcoming lunch meeting with Dario Keller. Dario has been a close friend of Noah's parents for a long time, but their relationship has changed since the Free World's business intensified. Noah feels that Dario enjoys questioning him and finding reasons to disagree or disapprove of his actions and motives, despite being a strong ally of the Free World.

Upon arriving at Bar Central, Noah sees that Dario is already seated across from Adriana, surrounded by his bodyguards. Noah's Freedom Corps joins the group, adding to the security detail cocooning the table.

"You look stressed, Noah," Dario states in European English, "Surely you can start to enjoy your Free World now?"

"Well," Noah chuckles, "I just didn't expect this circus around me," referring to the five Freedom Corps shadowing his every move and the autograph hunters eager to catch a glimpse of a famous face. He lowers his voice and leans into Dario, "The Free World is far from free for me, and a full day in the USN hot seat can be tiring."

"What do you mean, you didn't expect it? What did you think was going to happen?"

Noah suddenly feels small before the great man, recalling Dario's aversion to complaints.

"Honestly," Noah continues, "The project itself was so major, so epic, so much to do just to get to the point where we were standing on the island. I honestly didn't give much thought to what my life, specifically, would be like when we got to this stage. I guess I assumed I'd be able to enjoy the Free World as much as the next person. Obviously, I was wrong."

Dario ignores the self-pity, his face straightens, and he lowers his voice, "You do know you are moving much too fast, don't you?"

Noah's heart drops at the disappointment in Dario's voice. He always harboured secret feelings about Dario being proud of his accomplishments - like his parents never were. He opens his mouth to speak before Adriana jumps in, sensing Noah's annoyance.

"Now, now, gentlemen, let us not bring the office to the dinner table."

"No, no, it's ok, sweetie," Noah assures her. "Look, Dario, I understand your reservations about Brazil, but they have been unfounded as yet."

Dario double takes, his face contorts with anger, and he speaks softly. "First of all, I don't only express reservations with Brazil. I expressed reservations with every unvetted member of Free World society," he slams his hand down on the table. "This is not what was agreed, Noah."

"Dario, please, you're making a scene," Adriana whispers as heads swivel in their direction.

"I understand that the original plan spoke of only vetted individuals," says Noah, "but I believe it was prudent to amend this slightly. After all, how can we rightfully refuse entry to the Free World to such a vast amount of people?"

"Yes, I agree," says Adriana. "So did Vanessa (more or less). Noah doesn't make these decisions alone; all the founders have their say. And look at Iceland; it's living proof that we're correct."

"Huh," Dario chuckles. "Don't expect me to believe your Vanessa Hemp agreed to such reckless actions. And Simon Craig even less so. And for your information, there is a Brazil and

Cuba for every Iceland. Packed to the brim with selfish individuals stuck in a lack mindset, doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past as they wait for an opportunity to take control. Are you blind man? Are you even aware of the recent terrorist attacks?"

Adriana scans the vicinity for eavesdroppers as Dario's toxic words spew into Noah's heart.

"There is no evidence the attacks had any connection with Brazil," says Noah.

"Good God, man, you really are one of the most politically clueless individuals I have ever met in my life, aren't you?"

Noah is relieved that Dario's keeping his voice down. But his angry tone shunts him back to his childhood as he relives the feelings evoked by his father, who always arrived at the perfect moment with a put-down or an insult. Adriana reaches for her Noah's hand.

"Dario, I think we should change the subject," says Adriana. "Now, we wondered if you had plans to join us in the Free World. You know the accommodation is at least top of the range!" She smiles sweetly.

"The modulars are groundbreaking, revolutionary, even," Noah jumps in with a stroke of Dario's ego. "They resemble Lego but remain sturdier than brick; I'm amazed at how quickly one can be built up or taken down. Fully integrated into Bea's mainframe to help with genetically engineering crops. Without Keller Industries, the Free World wouldn't be here today; I think it's only right you have some sort of permanent residence on the island, then at least you can come and go as you please."

Dario reaches for an olive, gulps it down and waves the praise away with the flick of a wrist. He stares at Noah with disdain. "And how are your parents Noah? Have they visited the Free World yet?" Noah can feel the change of subject was begrudging.

"They threatened to on occasion."

"That's a sore subject," Adriana cuts in. "Noah's not looking forward to the day they visit. Do you still keep in touch, Dario?"

"They've hardly spoken to me since the day they found out I was the Free Worlds' biggest benefactor."

"You're kidding?" Says Noah, "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised though."

"And I assume the wonderful Vanessa will be joining us at some point?" Dario asks.

"No, unfortunately," says Noah, "She's already on a plane to Brazil with Olivia Karlsson. They're picking up Karine Craig from her recent stint assisting the medical centre."

Dario double-takes, "Vanessa Hemp is on her way to Brazil with Olivia?"

"Yes."

"I assume she has the Imperial Guard accompanying her?"

"Yes, she does," says Noah. "She has Danny Finn and Robbie Finn, who entered the Free World Swap Programme. But why do you say that?"

"Why do I say that?" He answers with sarcasm. "I say that because - despite your ignorance - I am aware of the political tension directed towards the Free World, and your Vanessa Hemp is one in a million, Noah; it would behove you to ensure her protection."

# CHAPTER SIX

Danny Finn

Danny boards the plane to Brazil, feeling apprehensive. For the first time since arriving in the Free World, he and his team have a concrete mission to work towards - something to investigate and plan for.

Zasha Ivanov left Supetar for her first off-Island mission - to lead the investigation into recent attacks, travelling to St. Helena, Mont Lublin, and Brazil. Danny is protective of all his team, but with Zasha Ivanov, his protection resembles something closer to brotherly love. He wore many hats to help her adjust to Free World life. His apprehension at asking her to return to the field was unfounded - she seemed invigorated by the prospect of flexing her analytical muscles.

Despite the peace of Supetar, Danny feels a growing sense of unease over the looming threat from GPX and the recent random terrorist attack. He continues to train the Freedom Corps with skills he hopes they'll never need, but now he senses something sinister brewing beneath the surface. Which only served to vindicate his feelings about this being the wrong time for Robbie to assert his independence. He turns to his son, who's sleeping silently with a soft snore.

*But try explaining that to a headstrong, bad-tempered young man who's intent on flying free.*  
"Can I get a whiskey and coke, please, Bea?"

***"Certainly, Danny."***

Bea highlights Dannys' HoloLens, where he can locate his selected drink. He rises to his feet and pours himself the beverage.

"You must be stoked to see Karine, huh?" Danny says to Vanessa.

"Yes, I can't wait. She's been in Brazil for eight months."

"She'll be on the return flight with us?"

"Yes, she will be. Following a meeting with the secretary, we'll be ready when you are."

"I'll do my best to get sleepyhead sorted out pronto."

"Oh no, Danny, there's no rush; just take your time. I am slightly concerned, though. I was on the phone with Karine Craig, and the call dropped earlier today. Bea couldn't reconnect."

The information pings some interest, "Bea, what happened to the connection in Brazil?" Danny asks.

***"I apologise, but I cannot establish a connection with Brazil."***

"That's not what I asked, Bea."

***"I lost the connection at 9:23 am this morning and currently lack additional information."***

"Bea, you've got to be kidding."

***"Could you kindly rephrase the question, Danny?"***

"Did you get hacked? Was this some kind of malicious move or just a computer glitch?"

***"I regret to inform you that I cannot establish any signal connections from Brazil. And therefore, I have no more information to report."***

"Do you think there's a problem?" Asks Olivia.

The question hangs in the air like a dark cloud engulfing the plane; Danny and Vanessa exchange uneasy looks. Both are unwilling to worry Olivia by vocalising the potential for concern.

Vanessa grabs Olivia's hand affectionately as Danny changes the subject.

"How old are you these days, Olivia?"

"Eighteen."

"You know, I recall when you first got to Supetar," Danny remarks. "Vanessa was all smiles, and you were so shy. I couldn't help but wonder how Vanessa would prep you for those USN duties. Since then, I've probably seen you on TV more than in person. You kinda remind me of my wife when she was your age."

"What!" squeals Robbie, who jerks awake as the fastened seat belt lights ping to life. Rubbing his eyes and yawning. "What'd I miss?"

"Nothing, kid. Buckle up; we're about to touch down."

As Danny exits the aircraft onto the unusually quiet runway, he immediately feels the stifling heat as he descends the ladder. The air is thick with charred and smoky burnt meat, mixed with the earthy aromas of damp soil and wet leaves from the surrounding rainforest. He notices some scattered soldiers standing ominously around the small runway, adding to the tension in the air.

*There aren't any Freedom Corps. This feels odd.*

Danny snaps out of his conversation with Olivia and cups his new stun gun without removing it from its holster. Olivia senses his unease and stops talking.

*Something feels strange.*

Suddenly, Danny spots two soldiers carrying Uzi submachine guns standing under the plane's stairs. They growl silently at him.

"Vanessa!" Danny calls out, "Get behind me, please."

Vanessa swipes away her messages and clocks the suspicious circumstances; she slowly turns towards Danny and stops walking. Danny signals for Robbie to stay calm, worried about his temper. Danny locates the leader - he's talking into his watch and signalling at the soldiers behind the team from Supetar.

Once again, Danny turns back to the soldiers walking toward him, speaking aggressively in Portuguese. The soldier on Danny's right-hand side attempts to grab his gun - Danny resists.

"Danny Finn e Guarda Imperial De Supetar," Olivia says, "ele esta autorizado a ter uma arma."

The small, stocky Brazilian begins wagging his index finger and nodding his head, he continues barking aggressively, and the other guard is trying to remove Danny's gun from his holster - Danny resists. Robbie tries to block his path. Olivia translates as Vanessa grabs her hand.

"He's saying that you've broken the law by carrying a gun on the plane; he wants you to give it to him."

Danny continues to resist and nods, "Explain again, Olivia," Danny orders. "Slower this time."

Olivia pokes one of the guards on the shoulder; she opens her mouth to speak but stops. The guard seems insulted by Olivia's soft jab with her tiny finger. He cups his large fingers across Olivia's face and shoves her head backward; her head hits Vanessa's mouth, drawing blood.

Vanessa shrieks in disgust - Olivia falls to the ground holding the back of her head.

Robbie throws a right hook at one of the soldiers, who ducks and shoves his gun into Robbie's face - Robbie falls to the ground.

Danny retaliates by headbutting the perpetrator and right-jabbing his comrade. Both attempts connect solidly.

"Danny!" screams Vanessa, "Behind you!"

Danny receives a smack - a hard smack, with a metal object squarely on the back of his head, in the same spot he received the injury on the way to the Free World. He can feel the wounds reopening; he staggers and falls to the ground whilst trying desperately to resist slipping away.

The world turns black.

Danny emerges from his stupor to the silent whisper of a familiar voice,

"Danny, can you hear me? It's Emily."

*Bea must have connected her. My head's pounding.*

Danny tries to gather his thoughts and assess his surroundings. His head is pounding, and the pain intensifies after noticing the blood-stained uniform on his left side. He's sitting on a chair behind bars, with his hands and feet tied up. He attempts to lift his head slightly, but the pain makes it difficult to focus.

"Zasha," Danny whispers.

"She's not too far off," Emily replies. Danny feels a tinge of hope when he remembers Zasha Ivanov is already in Brazil, investigating the terrorist attacks.

Danny surveys his surroundings and takes in the scene. He sees a large boardroom table outside his cell and notices someone tied up like him - his son, Robbie Finn. Danny winces and grits his teeth; the throbbing in his head intensifies. On the other side of the table, he sees Vanessa Hemp, her once-tidy bobbed black hair now a mess, with her hands and feet tied to the chair. Tears are streaming down her flushed cheeks. She's staring aimlessly at her young protegee Olivia Karlsson, who's sitting on the left-hand side of the table, her face screeched up as if she's in permanent pain, tears are streaming down her face, and she's in shock.

"Danny," Emily whispers into his ear, "Try and slow your breathing."

*I can't. My head is too painful.*

Danny's head falls against his chest, and pain shoots through his body.

The world turns black.



## Noah Levi

Noah, used to enduring insults from a father figure, is still stung by Dario's acrid demeanor. Though he and Dario have butted heads before, this exchange feels different. Unable to dismiss Dario's hostility as a fleeting outburst, Noah feels that Dario's visit to Supetar was specifically to confront him, leaving Noah at a loss for words. Before he can delve deeper into his thoughts, Bea voice interrupts.

***"Noah Levi, Vanessa Hemp has designated you as her emergency contact."***

"Yes, Bea," panic rising. "What is it?"

***"Vanessa Hemp has been taken against her will."***

"What?!" Noah hisses, slightly louder than he should when dining in a nice restaurant. He rises to his feet - heads turn in his direction.

***"Connecting."***

Noah's eyes are fixed on the screen as the video feed materialises before him. His heart sinks at the sight of Olivia Karlsson, her face contorted with terror. He gasps and covers his mouth, struggling to comprehend what he's seeing.

"Vanessa, what's going on?" he whispers. "Can you hear me?"

As Vanessa turns her head, Noah sees Robbie Finn, bound and gagged. A tanned man with a black moustache and neatly combed hair appears, dressed in military attire with a banana protruding from his top pocket. The man approaches Vanessa and slowly unties the rope around her mouth. Noah watches in horror, his heart racing with every passing moment.

***"Noah, Vanessa cannot hear you, and I cannot modify her settings without her permission. Her current settings only allow video communication. However, Emily Finn can speak to her at Imperial Guard headquarters in the control room."***

Noah jogs out of the restaurant, heading towards the Central Gardens for privacy. The Freedom Corps follow him closely, keeping a watchful eye on his every move. The onlookers in the restaurant stare intently at Noah, sensing the gravity of the situation.

The Brazilian man on the screen speaks in broken English, his gaze filled with hatred and power.

"Now, Miss Vanesa Hemp," he says deliberately. "I want you to listen to me very carefully."

"Please release my friends," Vanessa pleads. "They've done nothing; they can't help you."

The captor's expression slowly transforms into a twisted smile as he stands up and draws a machete from his holster. He approaches Olivia Karlsson, who can barely bring herself to watch, she begins to panic, and a soft groan turns into a loud squeal. Robbie attempts to move but can't. The Brazilian wrenches Olivia's head back and lifts the knife to her throat - Olivia's squeal is now a whimper.

"Please, please, don't hurt her; I'll do anything you want."

"You want me to release your friends," he asks coldly and calmly. "How about I kill them both - starting with this sweet innocent little creature?"

"Please, please, no, stop, please don't hurt her, please."

The Brazilian releases his grip on Olivia's head and walks toward Robbie. Noah Levi notices the cell behind Robbie but can't see if anyone's inside.

"Now, Miss Vanesa Hemp, I hope you have recognised the power that we have to attain the things that we want," he removes the banana from his top pocket and starts peeling it slowly, his eyes narrow, piercing into Vanessa.

"Who are you?"

He looks shocked by the question, "None of your business." He bites the top of his banana. "But I'm sure you will find out soon enough with all your fancy gadgets now that you have seen my face." He rests his banana on the table and looks closely at Vanessa. "You can see me, can't you, Noah Levi?"

Noah stops by a small pond nestled in the Central Gardens, his head buried in his hands. Adriana trails behind him, keeping a watchful eye over her husband.

"Bea," Noah says, his voice trembling, "Please inform the Imperial Guards of what's happening."

***"They are fully aware of the situation. Emily Finn is monitoring the live video feeds and tracking the location of Zasha Ivanov from the Imperial Guard control room."***

"Where's Danny and Zasha?"

***"Danny Finn is currently unconscious in the cell behind Robbie Finn. Zasha Ivanov is en route to Vanessa's location for a rescue operation. Would you like me to send Zasha a message? Additionally, would you like me to notify you when Danny regains consciousness?"***

Noah doesn't respond to Bea - the Brazilian interrupts his thoughts.

"What I want from you, Vanessa Hemp," he smiles, "And Noah Levi - is two things," he picks his banana up from the table. "First of all, I want you - and all your pesky Free World nonsense to leave these shores and never return," he bites the banana. "This includes the areas which are now proudly nominating themselves as living in the Free World, despite a lack of authority from the people who own the land," he pauses. "Either take them with you; where? I don't care, or we will remove them." He finishes his banana and tosses the skin at Robbie Finn. "Secondly, I want you to tell me where the antidote device is?"

"What antidote device?" Vanessa questions.

Noah's mind races as he turns around and scans the vicinity. "Where's Dario?" He bellows to Adriana.

Adriana turns around and looks further - she can't locate Dario.

"Bea," Adriana says, "Connect me to Dario Keller quickly." She waits for a second, nods, and mouths, "Answerphone."

The Brazilian double-takes. Sitting hunched over the chair, he straightens his back and stares agonisingly at Vanessa. "I am warning you, Miss Hemp; I have no time for games. I know - that you know what device I speak of. And I know that your Noah Levi is in possession of the

said device, so I will ask you one last time, Miss Hemp.” He rises to his feet and walks ominously over to Vanessa - Noah starts to panic.

“No, no, no,” Noah whispers, his voice trembling with fear. “You leave her alone. You leave her alone; she is a good person.”

Tears roll down his cheek as the Brazilian raises his left hand and smacks Vanessa. Noah doubles over in pain as if feeling his friends' agony. The captor lifts his right hand and hits Vanessa on the other side of her face,

“No, no, please; stop, please, stop,” Noah whispers as he bursts into tears. A crowd is forming behind Adriana, concerned at the behaviour of the leader of the Free World.

“And if you do not tell me what I want to know, there will be serious repercussions. Do I make myself clear?” The Brazilian leans down directly in front of Vanessa - he’s panting wildly, his face contorted with anger and rage,

“Do I make myself clear, Miss Vanessa Hemp?”

Noah lifts his head and sees his reflection in the pond. Adriana senses the opportunity to comfort her husband,

“Noah?” She asks.

He looks at her through bloodshot eyes - he nods as more tears roll down his cheek. Noah turns on his heels and walks quickly, followed by his chaperones, to the Imperial Guard headquarters. “Bea,” he says urgently, his voice filled with determination. “Call the Zincods.”

*And this time, I’m not taking no for an answer.*

## Danny Finn

The sound of knuckles smacking against Vanessa's skin thumps Danny back to consciousness. His wife continues to whisper in his ear.

"Danny, you're awake. Focus on my voice," Emily whispers urgently.

Danny opens and shuts his eyes to signal that he's listening.

"Zasha's on the scene; she's getting ready to make her move. Eighteen soldiers surround the vicinity, but only six are standing in her path. She's confident she can handle it."

Danny has no doubts; the thought injects some energy into him.

"He's getting violent; he's just struck Vanessa twice," Emily says.

Danny still can't see Robbie's face, but Olivia's condition makes his heart sink. Her eyes are wide and unblinking - paralyzed by the sensory overload.

"Please bring my boy home, Danny," says Emily.

Danny's heart aches with grief, and his stomach churns with anger. The situation feels hopeless.

"Do I make myself clear, Miss Vanessa Hemp?" The Brazilian withdraws a handgun from his holster; Vanessa starts to break down in hysterics.

"Please, please," Vanessa sobs. "I don't know where it is."

The Brazilian cocks his handgun and then turns to Robbie Finn - he breaks into a wide smile. He places his left hand over Robbie Finn's face and pushes his head back, slamming it against the cell bars. Danny winces in pain and sobs in frustration and helplessness. The Brazilian grabs Robbie's head and points the gun at his temple. Danny's panic rises further.

"No, take me," Danny pleads as he swallows the lump in his throat, "I can help you. I'm with the Imperial Guard."

The Brazilian turns, looks blankly at Danny, and scans his uniform. "Yes, I have seen your kind; you can not help me," he turns back to Vanessa. Olivia groans loudly. "I will give you to the count of three, Miss Vanessa Hemp," he says, pointing the gun at Robbie's temple.

"Three,"

Danny struggles against the restraints, trying to rip them off his wrists as his mind races with urgency and desperation. He knows if he can just unlock his hands - despite the cell bars, the Brazilian is close enough for Danny to reach out and twist his neck. He pictures the move in his mind.

"Two."

Vanessa's panting through heavy sobs, "Please, please," she begs, "I don't know where it is. Please don't hurt us."

"Vanessa!" Danny yells, "Just tell him what he wants to know! Just tell him anything, Vanessa!"

"I'm sorry, I don't know, I'm sorry."

"Any location!" Danny screams. "Vanessa, just give him something!"

Olivia's groaning and crying, her screaming becomes more horrific as the numbers tick down.

"One."

Danny watches in horror as the Brazilian pulls the trigger, blowing Robbie's brains across the room; blood splats on the wall opposite. Danny breathes in sharply and keels over as much as

his hands allow; the bullet shell hits the floor with a clink, and the room goes quiet with shock, horror and disbelief. Danny can't cry; he can't think; he doesn't believe what he's just seen. Anger and grief wash over him. He stares blankly at his knees with his mouth wide open.

*Emily.* He thinks to himself.

Danny's body starts to dematerialize before his eyes, and a spark of panic morphs into relief. It's a sensation he's felt before; he's about to be transported to another location. Summoning all the energy in his neck muscles, Danny lifts his head one last time, determined to get one final look at his nemesis. He screams,

"I'm gonna kill you!"

But the words don't sound in mid-dematerialization, and the Brazilian's not looking in his direction anyway. His relief morphs into hope when Zasha Ivanov bursts through the door like a raging bull, proudly waving her gun - manifesting Danny's feelings.

"Fuckin kill that son of a bitch!" he screams at the top of his voice - to no avail.

Danny's hope turns to frustration as he recalls the new instructions from Noah Levi about killing people.

*Zasha Ivanov has no bullets in that gun.*

# INTERLUDE

## Zasha Ivanov

Zasha Ivanov scans the room, watching Vanessa, Danny, Olivia, and Robbie dematerialize, leaving her alone to face the Brazilian. With a steely determination, Zasha slowly lifts her gaze to meet the Brazilian, who is still reeling from the shock of what has just happened. As he turns to face her, his expression twists into a snarl of outrage and anger.

"Who the hell are you?!" He roars at the top of his voice, his outrage filled with venom and fury.

Zasha releases a soft chuckle and pulls the trigger, firing the weapon to its highest level, freezing the Brazilian in place, his mouth open in a fit of rage. She instinctively raises a finger to her ear.

"Was that you?"

"Zasha, this is Simon Craig. I've taken over from Emily. No, it wasn't me. But you must move - two soldiers are coming your way."

Zasha sprints down the narrow corridor, her heart racing as she hears the sound of approaching footsteps. Rounding the corner, she spots two soldiers ascending the stairway. Without hesitation, she pulls out her weapon, aims, and fires with deadly accuracy, quickly taking out both soldiers. With the guards neutralised, Zasha holsters her gun and jumps down the first set of stairs, moving with a fluid grace that speaks to her expert training and physical prowess.

"One more guy is coming up the next flight of stairs," Simon warns - Zasha smirks as her excitement rises. Without hesitation, Zasha jumps onto the staircase railings and slides down on her rear, her movements fluid and effortless. Just as the soldier reaches the top step, she grabs his head and swings her legs around, using her momentum to incapacitate him with a swift move.

Zasha continues sliding down the next flight of steps, scanning for further threats. She glides off the railing, lands on her feet, takes a deep breath, and readies herself for the next challenge.

"Is there anyone outside, Simon?"

"Yes, two soldiers on either side of that doorway, and there are six soldiers around the other side of the building; they'll see you."

"The hover scooter is hidden in the trees."

"Take the first two out and then dash for it," Simon says.

She creeps out of the building - aims, and shoots twice, freezing both guards. She dashes without looking back. When she reaches the trees without being detected, she releases a breath, ducks down and goes for the backpack. She presses the big red button. As the device transforms, Zasha glances back at the building, scanning for further threats. As some more guards approach the front of the building, they spot the frozen guards and raise the alarm, bringing four more guards to the front of the building.

Zasha jumps on the machine and zooms off.

Zasha's heart races as she speeds through the dense forest, using the hover scooter's top speed of sixty miles per hour to outpace the soldiers chasing her on motorbikes and quad bikes. She climbs higher, hoping to find cover among the trees and avoid their bullets.

As she glances back, she feels a spark of excitement as the soldiers still pursue her. But she knows that the hover scooter is undeterred by obstructions on the ground, and she feels confident that she will be victorious as long as she can dodge their bullets.

Zasha sees the light at the end of the forest, signalling her approach to the runway. She approaches from the left side, her eyes fixed on the perched plane at the end of the runway. But to her surprise, she glances back and sees that the soldiers have kept up with her, still in hot pursuit.

“Bea, start the plane. Get moving the second I’m inside.”

***“Absolutely, Zasha, processing your request.”***

Zasha watches as the plane flickers to life and rolls forwards.

“Bea, open the door.”

***“Certainly, Zasha, processing your request.”***

Zasha's heart pounds as she emerges from the trees and approaches the plane. She can see Bea creeping the plane forward, trying to align it with the hover scooter. Glancing back, she sees the chasing pack of soldiers getting closer, their weapons trained on her - a flicker of panic flares in her chest.

***“I have assumed control of both devices to ensure precise alignment with the plane's door during your arrival.”***

With every ounce of determination, Zasha increases her speed, leaning forward on the hover scooter and pushing it to its limit. The wind whips past as she approaches the plane's open door, her eyes fixed on the prize.

As she reaches the door, Zasha takes a deep breath and leaps off the hover scooter, landing inside with a thud. She can feel the plane accelerating as it takes off into the sky. Lying flat on her back, Zasha rolls over to peer outside the door, watching as the soldiers fade into the distance below.

With a mixture of relief and triumph, Zasha lets out a roar of laughter.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Noah Levi

Noah's world comes crashing down around him as he leans against the Imperial Guard modular, struggling to compose himself against the flood of energy from the Zincods' telepathic link. He bellows with a voice full of anger and grief.

"Why couldn't you have done that before?" he cries, wiping a tear from his cheek. "A boy is dead - you're too late!"

A surge of emotions engulfs him, and his words get stuck in his throat. It feels warm and comforting.

*Sorrow, is it sorrow?*

"No, I won't calm down, I can't calm down - stop trying to calm me down. A young boy is dead!"

*Robbie Finn is dead because of me.*

The Zincods break the link.

Noah's body convulses with dry heaves as he struggles to come to grips with the devastating loss of Robbie Finn. He mutters in despair,

"How can I let this happen? How can they let this happen?"

As he turns around, he sees Emily Finn standing at the entrance of the Imperial Guard office, gazing at him with tears streaming down her face. They share a moment of silence, both lost in their grief.

Noah has no words, his mind consumed with thoughts of the team and the tragedy. He thinks of Robbie, Olivia, and Vanessa as a deep sense of sorrow and guilt rises within him.

Suddenly, a scream pierces the air, and Noah and Emily snap out of the trance. They rush toward the Medical Centre, minds racing with fear and urgency.

Noah and Emily arrive at the Medical Centre and are struck by the sight before them.. The Zincods have placed the team in a small circle, still tied to their chairs, with Robbie Finn's lifeless body slumped in the centre, a bullet hole in the left side of his head.

Emily's face is contorted with pain and anguish as she tries desperately to untie Robbie's wrists. She cradles his head in her hands. Noah moves to untie Danny.

"Bea, get the Freedom Crops here quickly to disperse the crowd," Noah commands.

***"They are en route and expected to arrive in three minutes and thirty seconds. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"***

As chaos unfolds, Olivia Karlsson remains eerily calm, her face showing no reaction to the tragic scene. She seems to be in a trance-like state, lost in her thoughts and emotions.

A nurse rushes forward to untie the ropes binding Olivia to her chair. As soon as she is free, Olivia slumps forward, her body devoid of energy. The nurse catches her before falling to the ground, cradling her in her arms and calling for medical assistance. Olivia is in a state of shock.

*Danny looks like he's about to explode.*

He rises to his feet - slowly, whilst staring intently at Vanessa.

"Danny, please," says Noah, "This is not Vanessa's fault; we're all in this together."



Danny ignores Noah, his eyes fixed on his dead son, lost in grief. He grinds his teeth and turns back to Vanessa, wiping his nose on his sleeve and whispering slowly.

"Why didn't you just tell him something?" he asks, his voice thick with anguish. He nods towards his son's lifeless body and continues. "Anything! Any location!"

A tear of pain rolls down Danny's cheek as he struggles to come to terms with the loss of his son. Noah watches in silence, his heart heavy and overflowing with emotion.

Tears stream down Vanessa's face as she sits motionless in her seat, her face twisted with anguish. She's lost in her thoughts, unable to process the magnitude of the death of a young boy. Adriana and Samar arrive, moving to protect Vanessa from Danny, empathizing with the overwhelming emotions of seeing a son murdered. Danny shoves Adriana away, and Noah responds by placing his body between Danny and Vanessa.

"Please, Danny," Noah says. "This is not Vanessa's fault."

Danny tries to push Noah, but he can't muster the strength. Noah can feel Danny's pain and rage and replicates his tears. "We're all here for you, my friend," Noah whispers, his heart heavy with sorrow.

Danny screams, his voice filled with pain. "Why didn't you tell him, Vanessa!?" he cries out. "Anything! Any location!" He drops to the ground, grabs onto his son's ankle, pulls himself towards him and inhales his scent.

Noah steps back to allow Danny and Emily to begin their mourning. He scans the vicinity and breathes a sigh of relief as he watches Brendan Baker and a group of Freedom Corps dispersing the crowd, providing a sense of order and safety amidst the chaos.

"Bea, can you try calling the secretary of the Brazilian Free World again? Please, god, we can get through. They have to know about the death threats."

***"I apologise, Noah, but I can still not establish any signals from Brazil. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"***

Noah turns back towards the melee and jerks backwards following a sudden slap on his left cheek from Emily Finn.

She breathes deeply and sobs. "What the fuck was that, Noah!?" She yells.

He's taken aback and can't find the words to respond. He suddenly realises how much he relies on Vanessa Hemp to deflect attention from his shortcomings. Emily slaps him again, and he reaches up to rub his cheek. The lump in his throat grows as Emily spews rage towards him.

"What is this device, Noah!?" Emily screams. "I want to know now! Tell me, you coward!" She goes to slap him again, but Danny catches her arm and pulls her back.

Emily's rage smothers Noah. He can't think; he can't speak. All he knows is that life in the Free World will never be the same again.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## Zasha Ivanov

The thrill of the chase ends with a thump back to reality - the monotony of the solar plane's almost silent hum provides a meditative cocoon to calm her pulse.

*It's been three years.*

Three years of peace and tranquillity, the likes of which Zasha had never really experienced in her first thirty-one years.

Her first international mission on behalf of the Free World has forced her to re-open deep-rooted, unresolved issues. Her stomach churns with regret as she considers her past. Years of training had prepared her for a lonely existence, building short-lived connections for whatever international espionage mission she was assigned. Now, for the first time in her life, she has friends. Real friends like Samar Behi, Emily Finn and Danny Finn. None more so than Danny Finn.

The captain of the Imperial Guard quickly recognised the problems Zasha experienced socialising, connecting and adapting to a new life, a life much less intense than Zasha ever considered possible for herself. Danny Finn became Zasha's haven, like a non-judgemental older sibling who looks past all the self-constructed pretences and sees the real you.

To her real friends, she's not Zasha Ivanov, the Russian enemy. She's just Zasha Ivanov.

The sadness and self-pity turn to anger and grief as she thinks about the tragic death of Robbie Finn. As someone involved in countless murders in her past life, she knows all too well the pain and devastation that such violence can cause. But this time, she finds herself on the other side of the fence, feeling the pain and loss of a man she had come to know and respect.

Her anger intensifies as she thinks about Robbie's senseless death. She feels a burning desire for revenge, a need to make those responsible pay. A phone call interrupts her racing thoughts.

### **Accept Samar Behi video call?**

#### **Yes or No**

She feels a spark of excitement when she sees the caller id. *He's probably phoning about Robbie.*

"Hello, little mouse."

"I wish you'd stop calling me that. Where are you?"

"I'm on a plane from Brazil," she replies.

"You know about Robbie?"

She sighs and looks into the camera, "I do."

"What happened?"

As Samar asks the question, Zasha recalls a conversation with Vanessa Hemp; about how she was trying to get Samar to start acting like a typical teenager. He's had a tough life and deserves a childhood.

"Why do you ask this question? You know I can not talk about the Imperial Guard..."

"... I want to know, Zasha. Was it because of the antidote device?"

"Samar, I can not tell you this..."

"... Why not? I'm not a kid anymore. I brought the device to the Free World; I have a right to know that it's used for the greater good."

"And what exactly is the greater good, little mouse? Why should you or I get to decide what course of action is for the greater good?"

"Zasha, you're avoiding the question, and I think you at least owe me honesty."

Zasha's heart sinks. 'Why do you say this?' Guilt pangs Zasha's heart as she recalls chasing Samar through The Heights in Washington for the antidote device that could change the world.

"Because you killed my friends Zasha when you chased me across Washington trying to get the device. I forgave you for the atrocities. But now I want you to do something for me. I think you owe me that."

Zasha feels shocked at Samars' attempt at emotional blackmail. It unsettles her to watch the shift in the behaviour of the young and naive boy, who typically has such a trusting and optimistic outlook towards others. Now, he is resorting to more sinister tactics to achieve his objectives.

### **Accept Simon Craig video call?**

#### **Yes or No**

"I am sorry little mouse, but I must leave you; I have important business to take care of." Zasha ends the call with Samar, feeling slightly relieved at Simon's timing. She swipes to answer.

"Zasha, turn the plane around," says Simon, as the six-foot-four frame of Brendan Baker storms through the door of the Imperial Guard building. "I'll brief you with new intel, and then Brendan will meet you in Manaus."

"Finally," Brendan smacks his hands together, "time to get down to business."

Zasha tuts and rolls her eyes, "Do you ever take anything seriously, Brendan?"

"Why d'you say that Zash, because I'm not constantly scowling?"

"Zasha, I'm sending this info to you," Simon interrupts. He flicks his wrist, and a picture of the Brazilian appears on Zasha's HoloLens. "That's the guy who killed Robbie Finn, but you're not going for him; we've got one important person in their Free World. More or less, this tyrant just declared war on the Free World. He's already killed one person and warned us to remove the Brazilian Free World, or he will."

"Who's the target?" Brendan asks.

"My wife - Karine Craig," his head swivels back and forth between Brendan and Zasha. He's silently pleading for them to facilitate his wife's safe return home. "Zasha must stop and charge her plane, which takes ten hours. By then, you'll be in Brazil," Simon turns his attention back to

the intel. "Now, we've pieced all this information together from Zasha's intelligence, Bea's mainframe and general internet searches."

Brendan affectionately places his hand on Simon's shoulder, "Don't worry, mate, we'll bring her back for you safe and sound. You just leave that to us."

The door slides open, and Emily Finn storms into the room with tears streaming down her flushed cheeks. Danny Finn follows her, attempting to calm her down, but his face is equally red with anger.

"What the hell was that all about!?" Emily screams at Simon. Her face contorted with outrage.

"Em, please, this isn't the time," Danny pleads, trying to guide her out of the room. But Emily pushes him away.

"I want to know what the fuck that was all about! What the fuck is this antidote device!?" she screams, her voice shaking with emotion.

Zasha wants to speak up, but Emily's outburst unsettles her. The room falls silent, and Zasha can hear the hum of the solar plane.

"Please, Em," Danny tries again, "let's talk about this later."

"Why was my son murdered!?" Emily cries out, gasping for air. "Noah Levi won't tell me anything - neither will you. You're all a bunch of cowards, sitting here with your fancy technology like you're gods. It doesn't give you the right to play god, Simon Craig. And you can tell Noah Levi that as well!" With those words, Emily storms out of the room.

The silence lingers, and Zasha can feel a lump growing in her throat. She closes her eyes and takes deep breaths to steady herself.

"Ok, let's get back to it," says Simon with a sigh. "This guy's name is Helio Caio. His money comes from the cocaine trade, exporting to most of North and South America. When the satellites were infected, he had the resources to move quickly. Unfortunately for him, he wasn't the only drug lord or billionaire energy magnet fighting for political recognition at this point. A small turf war ensued before a truce."

Simon brings up an old-school image of an A to Z-like map marking territories, with each gang name marked. He continues,

"I have no idea who Zasha had to kill to get this map, which seems to be the original one, with handwritten territories marked, but hey," he turns to Brendan, "Ask no questions, hear no lies." He turns back to the screen.

"Now, these various drug lords do seem to have agreed on set territories and more or less have been getting along without too much mishap, until that is," Simon swipes the screen, another figure appears; he's dressed smarter than Helio in a white suit, "This man, came on the scene. This guy, known only by his nickname Andinho, was the instigator for all hell to break loose in Brazil. He's the director of the biggest energy company in Brazil, Nacional Brazilia.

Before the satellites got infected, he had a net worth of sixteen billion Brazilian Real, which amounts to about three billion American dollars.”

“Jeez, Louise,” Brendan whistles.

“He was nowhere to be seen when the turf wars kicked off, probably staying out of the way, letting the low lives kill themselves. As I said before, the information is all a bit sketchy. Still, when he finally showed himself, he seemed to take control quite quickly,” Simon brings back the image of Helio Caio, “After further research, I discovered that Helio and Andinho are cousins. When Helio was imprisoned for murder at nineteen, Andinho’s deep pockets released him without charge. That was thirty years ago, and since then, you can imagine the debt Helio had to repay to his cousin. Andinho’s return was recognised as the closest thing to a Brazilian prime minister. His family connections with Helio mean that he - no doubt - has access to his army. The Brazilian Free World is on the edge of The Amazon rainforest; Manaus is directly in the centre of Andinho’s energy territory. Also, you should know,” Simon swivels back around and brings up an image of the old school A-Z map.

“It’s also on the outskirts of Porto Velho, Francisco’s territory - and I know that Andinho doesn’t like this ‘Francisco’ being anywhere near his territory. He’s ordered Helio to remove him and anyone not paying for their energy, which includes the Free World. I had no idea that the Brazilian Free World was in the middle of all this barbaric nonsense; I daresay Noah doesn’t either. I’m surprised Vanessa didn’t pick up on it, though. It’s messy, dangerous, and I shudder to think what Noah has gotten us into.”

“This ain’t Noah’s fault, though, is it?” says Brendan.

“Really, well, who do you think is responsible?”

“Well, I dunno about that, but he’d be lynched if he refused entry to the Free World to such a large number of people.”

“You must be kidding. It’s easy; you just don’t let them in.”

“I agree with Simon,” says Zasha. “My understanding is that the Free World is supposed to be secret, And if a whole city has joined without a choice. Well, this is not good. It exposes us.”

“Why isn’t it good?” Asks Brendan, “They all have a better quality of life. How does it expose us?”

“I’m surprised by the question,” says Simon, “I expect more from you.”

Brendan looks disappointed; he continues, “Even if Noah did have this intel at the time, I don’t think it would have swayed his decision.”

Simon chuckles; “Brendan; you’re probably right, and that’s the troubling thing. But as Zasha pointed out, we can’t be sure how many of the Brazilian Free World residents actually would choose to live like this. The mayor forced this way of life on everyone. Even though (like you rightly said, Brendan) he’s no doubt raised the lifestyle of his residents considerably, forcing people to do anything will always result in a backlash. And I think that’s what we’re experiencing here. These tyrants probably have direct access to everything in the Free World; bringing them in has put us all at risk.”

The call ends with Zasha’s mind filled with questions and confusion as she reflects on the conversation. She can’t help but feel a sense of disgust and disdain as she considers the contradictions inherent between different Free World hubs.

On the one hand, Supetar is a highly vetted, almost secret society, carefully curated to maintain a delicate balance. But at the same time, Noah Levi doesn’t insist that other hubs

adhere to the same vetting procedures, potentially putting the safety and security of Supetar (and other hubs) at risk.

Zasha is filled with conflicting emotions as she considers Noah Levi's secret possession of the antidote device. On the one hand, she understands the necessity of ensuring the survival of at least one hub in the face of the world's impending doom. But on the other hand, she cannot help but feel uneasy about the potential consequences of Noah's actions. Despite his public persona as a hero and saviour, Zasha finds it challenging to ascertain Noah's true intentions. Is he genuinely trying to save humanity, or is he merely looking out for his interests and those of his inner circle? Is he a saviour or a murderer? She inwardly curses her lack of knowledge of anything GreenplanetX related. Is Noah Levi, MrX?

As she considers these questions, Zasha knows that she must stay focused. She may not fully understand Noah's intentions, but she knows for sure that the residents of Supetar are innocent. They're all good people, and she's determined to protect them.

# CHAPTER NINE

Zasha Ivanov

Zasha squints into the darkness as she circles the perimeter of the small space to land her plane - her pulse rises.

"This would have been challenging in broad daylight," she mutters as she straps herself in and prepares for a bumpy one. She smirks at the silence of her Free World electric plane - powered by solar panels on the wings.

*The silence is useful.*

She uses all her strength to keep the plane steady as she lowers into darkness, the full moon barely lighting the way. She grits her teeth and curses as she struggles to maintain control. She breathes a sigh of relief as she touches down and swivels the vehicle around for an easier takeoff.

She pauses to bask in the silence of the rainforest as she glances up at the moon and revels in its beauty. She lets her mind wander to the last time she was in a rainforest.

Back then, she was in Ukraine, spying on the Joint Multinational Training Camp. Three sites consist of military from the United States, UK, Canada and Ukraine. After a day's trek through the forest to Khmelnytskyi, she was blindsided by a visit from the Ukrainian Prime Minister, who coincidentally arrived on the same day as Zasha. Heightened security meant the building and broader perimeter were awash with security and K9s. Zasha had no choice but to dash into the forest, where She survived for seventy-two hours before being picked up.

She slaps her cheek, "Forget this, Zasha, you have work to do."

She grabs the new hover scooter, straps it to her back, and does the same with her sniper rifle. She searches the forest for loose leaves and branches to camouflage the plane. She puffs her cheeks, rests against a tree, and calls Simon on her HoloLens to open the com link.

The team decided the second plane would return to Supetar. Zasha watches with interest as Brendan executes a controlled drop through the warm, muggy night sky using the new propeller-powered paragliders. She's eager to try the device herself.

They zoom along the dirt track on the edge of the Amazon until they reach a small town on the border of Manaus. They glance at each other and silently agree that flying through the shantytown at fifty miles per hour is not advised.

***"The most efficient route to Manaus is through Tabatinga. The alternative route through the Amazon rainforest would significantly extend your travel time by approximately three hours. Please note that choosing the forest route would deplete the battery of both devices before reaching your transportation point."***

Zasha's anxiety rises as she sees the sprawling, messy, smelly city before them. She wonders if there'll ever be a time when she won't have to perform heroics in neglected parts of the world.

*I thought living in the Free World would be different.*

"I think we'll just have to hold our noses and walk through this place," Brendan says. "These shiny, excellent suits aren't exactly gonna help us blend in."

They begin a slow, measured trek through the eerily quiet town; keeping their eyes peeled, they stick to the middle of the road.

"So what's up, Zash? You seem quiet, distracted."

"None of your business."

"Wo! Don't get excited. I was just asking."

"Well, you can just stop."

"Alright, calm down, babe. I just thought I'd try to get to know you a bit, that..."

"...Just keep your mind on the task at ha..." she coughs before she finishes the sentence.

Brendan reciprocates.

They both cover their noses.

*The air smells of rotten corpses and barbecues.*

The heat adds to the discomfort - it's challenging to breathe, but they continue forward.

Zasha notices a row of purpose-built shanty homes stacked on each other, reminding her of the Heights in America.

A cheeky child pops his head out from one of the bottom lodges, grinning widely at the unexpected trespassers. He begins to play hide and seek with the Imperial Guards, disappearing and reappearing to the delight of himself but the annoyance of his bed pals.

Veering off to the left, Zasha and Brendan follow a dirt track with slightly more apparent markings on the road. Shanty houses line the left and right-hand side of the street, caked in blackness and adding to the tense casual stroll in the dark.

"That leads into the main town, and that's the road we need to take," Brendan says whilst glancing at a map on his HoloLens, "Bea, how long till we reach this location? Tell Zasha as well" He points to the map on his screen, indicating the edge of this shantytown.

***"At your current speed, the estimated arrival time is twenty-three minutes and thirty-five seconds."***

As Zasha and Brendan continue down the dirt track, a toddler waddles across the street wearing nothing but a nappy, and a group of men gather around a fire in an old dustbin in the middle of the road.

Brendan makes a scrape on the ground with his trainers, alerting the group to their presence. The men raise their heads and stare ominously at the trespassers, causing Zasha to tut at the lack of caution. She gestures for Brendan to remain quiet, and they continue on their way, keeping a low profile and scanning their surroundings for potential threats or obstacles.

Zasha notices something darting toward Brendan out of the corner of her eye. The toddler from before is holding a syringe. Before Zasha can react, the child plants the needle in Brendan's leg and releases a toxin. The toddler darts off, disappearing into the darkness, giggling.

Brendan reaches down and quickly withdraws the syringe; his facial features droop. Zasha rushes to his side, her mind racing as she tries to figure out what to do next.

"Brendan?" She raises her left arm to hold him upright. His eyes roll back into his skull, and he drops to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Zasha instinctively draws her weapon but can't locate anyone to aim at.

"Zasha," says Simon, "Bea just told me that Brendan's injected with Ketamine." Zasha glances down at her colleague and rolls her eyes.



“Great, just great,” she curses under her breath as she squints into the dark street and roars into the darkness, “Show yourselves!” She strategically covers every direction whilst spinning ninety degrees.

Zasha’s heart races as three muscle-bound Brazilians step out from the shadows, brandishing machine guns. The leader opens his mouth to speak, but Zasha wastes no time and aims her weapon, freezing him with his mouth open. She spins into a sideways roll and swiftly fires at the other two, taking them out precisely.

*One good thing about these stupid guns is that it doesn’t matter where on the body you shoot; the result is always the same.*

Zasha wastes no time admiring her handiwork and quickly turns her attention to Brendan, who is still reeling from the effects of the toxin. With a display of remarkable strength, she lifts him skyward.

As she runs into the dark forest, Zasha hides behind an unused rubbish tip and dumps Brendan’s body on the ground. She rests his head on a nearby tree trunk and perches beside him, sighing with exhaustion and relief.

Despite Zasha’s vast training for these scenarios, she can’t deny the fear building in her stomach. Zasha always has butterflies, the kind of nerves that come from doing something exciting, like flying 60 mph on a new hover scooter, dodging low-hanging trees and swerving bullets. But now, her life is different; she’s grown comfortable in her role in Supetar, which didn’t require any life-threatening activities.

*Until now.*

She sneaks a peek from behind the dumpster; this time, she’s inside the blackness.

*Huh, two can play at that game.*

A teenage girl is staring incredulously at the frozen militants. She turns and dashes into the dark.

A group of men return with the girl and gather around the frozen men, poking, pondering and staring into the dark forest.

“Hang tight, Zasha. I’m just getting info from Bea about a cure for the Kett.”

“Have you located the targets?” Zasha whispers to Simon.

“No, and there’s something else.”

“Go on.”

“We’ve just learned that the images we’ve been getting from Brazil have been hacked.”

“Hacked, by who?”

“That’s what we’d like to know. My team have just locked the hackers out - and we’re now seeing the true pictures of what’s going on.”

“Why can’t you locate the targets?”

“Because; either they’re deliberately not answering, which I can’t imagine why they would do that. Or maybe they can’t answer. Or, for some reason - they’ve been forced into removing their HoloLens from their eye, which means they don’t even know we’re calling, which would be consistent with the Secretary. Noah’s been trying to reach him for two days. That’s not the most troubling thing, though.”

“There’s more?”

“It looks like there’s an active army presence. They’re walking around with Uzi machine guns and seem to be setting fire to Free World property. This is bullshit, Zasha.”

"Bea, can you tell us the location of the targets?"

***"I'm sorry, Zasha, but sharing that information would violate privacy laws."***

"What?"

"Yeah, she can't do that, Zasha."

"Hangfire, Bea, are you saying you know where the targets are, but you won't tell us."

***"No human has requested me to search for the targets, but I have successfully located them."***

"Ok," says Zasha. "Where are they?"

***"I'm sorry, Zasha, but sharing that information would violate privacy laws."***

"Zasha, you're looking for this plant coming onto your screen now. You need to extract the Ethanolic Extract. Bea said the plant is plentiful in the Brazilian rainforest."

Zasha scans the mish-mash of plants, bushes and wildlife and wonders how she'd find it in daylight, let alone in the pitch-black darkness.

"Bea, can you help with this?"

***"Please rephrase the question, Zasha."***

"Can you direct me to a plant that contains Ethanolic Extract?"

***"Yes, I can, Zasha. Walk approximately ten feet northwest of your current location. The plant growing out of the tree will have Ethanolic Extract you require. I've highlighted the path for you."***

"It's truly amazing, Bea - how can you be so helpful and annoying in equal measure."

***"I apologise, Zasha. I will make an effort to be less bothersome in the future."***

Zasha grabs the plant from its resting place and brings it back to Brendan. She leans down, "How do I extract the oil?"

"You need to bite the bottom of the stem off and then squeeze the liquid into Brendan's mouth."

Brendan jolts back to consciousness with a deep inhale of breath.

Zasha responds by placing her hand over his mouth, "Shh," she says and then sneaks another peek at the cavalry. "They're not moving."

Brendan tries to move and winces.

"Oh shut up, you idiot," Zasha whispers, glancing back and forth at the cavalry.

"What, steady on, babe."

"It was a little pinprick; now shut up." Zasha notices one of the guys move to the forest's edge, shining a torch into the darkness.

*Reacting to Brendan's whining.* "See, they heard us."

"She said it will take about five-ten mins for your head to stop swimming," Simon says. "Just sit tight."

Zasha leans back against the dumpster and whispers; she wipes the sweat from her forehead and slows her breathing. "Bea, can you tell us if the targets have their HoloLens in their eye?"

***"I apologise, Zasha, but sharing that information would violate privacy laws."***

"Oh, shit, Simon! Write new code or something; get us in! This is ridiculous!"

"You can't change Bea without the USN voting for it," Brendan croaks as he lifts his back against the tree.

"Exactly," says Simon. "That rule is a core tenet of the Free World, Zasha. That's one thing we can never do."

"But, Simon, you must have access for emergencies."

"Nope, Bea is programmed to reject any new code without direct instructions from the USN. Bea, can you confirm that."

***"That is correct, Zasha. Only Noah Levi, Vanessa Hemp, and Olivia Karlsson can input code into my mainframe. The code will only be accepted if they add the update within seven hours following a decision from the USN."***

"Guys, you need to get going. I'm looking at some shocking scenes in the main square."

"Bea, display the map of this region and show Zasha."

Brendan points at the map whilst plotting a route around the outskirts. "Look, the darkness should cover our tracks, and we'll be out the other end before they know what's happened, just follow me."

Zasha nods her agreement.

They walk into the darkness holding their scooter, which is floating two feet off the ground. It does take a small amount of strength to hold the device down.

As they approach a clearing, they jump into their scooters and slowly creep around some trees, ensuring they stay hidden in the darkness. They rise as high as the scooter will take them, still covered by night, leaves and tree trunks.

Together, side by side, they zoom out onto the road and make a right turn down the dirt track. Zasha glances back.

"They're not pursuing!" she shouts as they make a left turn and fly directly through the centre of the dilapidated town and out the other side. Simon speaks to them both as they zoom through the air.

"Guys, bad news, we've just lost the signal again; we're working on it; for now, you're on your own."

"Bea, I can't believe you won't help with this. I order you to tell me where the targets are."

***"I apologise if you perceive my actions as erroneous, Zasha. However, based on my understanding of freedom, individuals have the liberty to choose, such as removing a HoloLens to conceal their location. The targets in question comply with the regulations regarding selfishness and are not in immediate danger. It is not within my programming to violate privacy regulations under these circumstances."***

"Are you saying the targets intentionally removed their HoloLens to conceal their location?"

***"I apologise, Zasha, but sharing that information would violate privacy laws."***

Zasha smacks the handlebars of the vehicle. "For shit's sake, Bea! Surely you can understand that we're in this location to rescue Karine Craig. Why can't you tell us her location? Search your memory files for the time that Karine Craig withdrew her HoloLens. Was she forced into it at gunpoint? Did it not look suspicious to you in any way?"

Bea pauses for what Zasha felt was longer than average.

***"I apologise, Zasha, but sharing that information would violate privacy laws."***

# CHAPTER TEN

Zasha Ivanov

They continue another three miles through the darkness until they arrive at a highly disturbed-looking Manaus emanating a red glow into the night sky. They exit their vehicles, press the red button and watch as the machines transform into smaller packages for them to strap to their backs. They squat down - out of sight - on the outskirts of the main square.

"Simon, are you seeing this?" Zasha asks in shock as she scans the vicinity.

"I am. I can see through your feed."

Shops border the square, with some showcasing new Free World modulators that conspicuously stand out against the dilapidated brick buildings. Unfortunately, Helio's men have vandalised these new modulators with graffiti that reads 'Fuck The Free World.' The other buildings in the area appear rundown and neglected, reflecting the town's corruption and hardships.

*No need to break what's already broken,* Zasha thinks to herself.

In the centre of the square is a circular, decrepit fountain that has fallen into disuse. Helio's men have started a fire in the fountain's centre, casting a chilling and menacing glow on everything around it.

A pole, usually used to filter water, stands at the center of the fire, rising about twenty feet high. A Freedom Corp uniform is tied to the top of the pole, soon to be consumed by the flames below.

"I'm assuming that's his uniform," Brendan nods at the naked Freedom Corp, lying on the ground, being harassed and tormented by three of Helio's men laughing and joking at the soldier's expense. The victim is pleading desperately for his life. Four long ropes lie on the ground, ominously stretching outwards towards each corner of the square, connected to poles on the roofs of the surrounding buildings. "This looks like trouble," she murmurs to herself.

"I can't believe Bea is tying us in red tape," says Brendan. "She's got some cheek. Bea, patch me through to Karine Craig's HoloLens and show Zasha too?"

***"I apologise, Brendan, but it would violate Free World privacy regulations to connect you to another HoloLens without their explicit consent."***

"Ok, but even if they have had to remove their HoloLens for some reason - you should still know the location of the lens, right? So you can tell us that because the lens isn't actually with the targets?"

***"I'm sorry, Brendan; Karine Craig has set her location private. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"***

"Private, are you serious? We're tryna help them. Who's their emergency contact? Have they been contacted?"

***"I apologise, Brendan, but that information is private. I cannot share without the individual's consent. Is there anything else I can assist you with"***

"Fuck me!"

"If Bea hasn't contacted anyone for an emergency, that must mean they're not in any immediate trouble," says Zasha.

*"I have assessed the situation, and there doesn't appear to be an immediate threat to the target's safety."*

"Yeah, assuming Bea knows what danger is," Brendan says.

*"I have monitored Mrs Craig's condition, and based on her vital signs and stability, I would not classify her condition as an emergency or immediate danger."*

"Yes, thanks, Bea."

*"You're welcome, Zasha. Please let me know if there's anything else I can assist you with."*

Zasha surveys the area again. She points to a new modular building set back from the main square, partially shrouded in darkness. "That must be the Freedom Corps building," she says. Zasha counts approximately fifteen Freedom Corps stationed on the ground in front of the building, guarded by three men armed with Uzi submachine guns. "If Karine Craig is inside one of these buildings, then she may be unable to respond to our call."

"We need to speak to those Freedom Corps," says Brendan.

"Agreed, I can get underneath one of those raised buildings. Maybe I can speak to them from there."

"Give me your hover scooter; I'm gonna find a safe place to stash these. This shite looks like it could get messy; it would be best not to carry these things around."

"Meet you back here in five."

Zasha darts behind the nearest building. Her heart skips a beat when she spots a soldier relieving himself against a tree. The soldier turns his head towards her - she crouches behind a set of stairs.

*He's drunk.*

Zasha sneaks up on the soldier and grabs his neck. She hesitates as she recalls the words of Simon Craig and Noah Levi.

*No Killing.*

Instead of twisting his neck, she slams his forehead into the tree trunk - he collapses. Zasha withdraws her weapon and fires once. She swiftly moves to the adjacent building, dives underneath, and creeps towards the crouched Freedom Corps.

"Psst!"

The sound grabs the Freedom Corps' attention, and Zasha uses the opportunity to reveal her identity. She takes a small pocket light from her uniform and shines it on her face, then her Supetar Imperial Guard stamps on her uniform for verification. The soldier stares in silence, his eyes shifting back and forth between Zasha and the other soldiers. He winks at her before turning his gaze back to the soldiers. The soldier crouches down, whispering in broken English. "Thank goodness you're from Supetar. How many men do you have?"

"Just two, whe..."

“... Hold on,” he straightens his back as one of the soldiers passes. He ducks back down, “Just two of you. How are you going to help us with just two of you?”

“We’re here for the doctor from Supetar, Karine Craig. Have you seen her?”

“Ah, yes,” he nods his head.

“We can’t contact them.”

“I’m not surprised. These traitors told us to take our HoloLens out.”

“Do you know where I can find the doctor?”

“I can’t be certain of the doctors’ location. I can tell you that they’re transporting Free World residents through the rainforest in trucks parked on the edge of the rainforest. When they left, nobody ever heard from them again. And the further you drive into the rainforest, the weaker the connection. You might never hear from them again if they’ve already gone. If they are still here, on the main square, then you’ll have to reach them before they get to that modular,” he points towards the medical centre, “That’s the last stop before the next group of hostages get carted off into one of those transport trucks.”

“Why are you all just sitting here?”

“What do you expect us to do? We’re outmanned and outgunned. Half of the Freedom Corps force worked for these guys; the ones that fought are mostly dead. Those who aren’t dead have left in those transport trucks - never to be heard from again. And then there’s us, sitting here waiting for the inevitable.”

“We’re going to try and help - I’ll make a distraction, wait for the sign and then attack those guards.” He gives a thumbs up as Zasha slides back to the other side of the building.

Zasha rises to her feet and cautiously retraces her steps. As she approaches a clearing, her heart jumps as she faces a soldier who has come around the back of the buildings to light a cigarette. The air thickens with tension as they glare at each other in mutual shock - the moment lingers. Without thinking, Zasha headbutts the soldier’s nose, feeling a sharp pain in her mouth as his cigarette burns her face. She fires a single shot at the soldier before moving on.

“Those Freedom Corps are dead in the water unless we can do something,” says Zasha.

“Do they know where the targets are?”

“No, he said we must reach them before they get taken into those trucks into the rainforest.”

“Why, what happens then?”

Zasha glances at Brendan with sorrow. “We’ll never hear from them again.”

“What?”

“There’s one more option,” Zasha dives into her pocket and reveals an antique-style wallet-size box. She opens the top.

“Kept that a bit quiet, didn’t ya?” Brendan jokes.

Zasha cautiously peeks out from behind the building. She extends her lips and blows the miniature devices out into the open. She watches as the shiny pieces of electronic sand flicker in the firelight and makes their way across the square,

“Bea, can you at least ensure none of these little cameras gets burned in the fire?”

***“Absolutely, Zasha, processing your request.”***

Three hundred and three camera views fill Zasha’s screen; she blinks away the optical overload and amends the settings. “Bea, share these camera angles with Simon Craig.” She

presses **public** so Brendan can see the images, too; she reaches for the corner of the screen and stretches it bigger.

"Ok, so people are being held hostage in all these locations," Brendan comments. "And they all have three or four armed soldiers watching them."

"Should be easy enough," Zasha predicts. One of the guards prodding and poking the naked Freedom Corp on the floor disappears into one of the shops - close to where the Imperial Guards are hiding. He returns seconds later with a bucket of water which he pours over the helpless Freedom Corp. Brendan wrenches and covers his nose.

"I don't think that was water."

"Ok," says Zasha, "I've seen enough."

"Hold on a minute, Zasha, don't be impulsive," Simon says, "I think I've found something. Enlarge camera eighteen,"

"Bea, is that Karine Craig?"

***"I apologise, Zasha, but Karine Craigs' settings are set to private."***

"That's my wife, Zasha. There's no doubt about that."

*They don't seem stressed.* "Bea, show Brendan and me the building on the map."

***"Certainly, Zasha, processing."***

"We can't use the grenades because they'll take out everyone," says Zasha.

Zasha instructs Brendan before they dart in opposite directions, staying hidden behind the small buildings.

*Another good thing about these stupid guns is that we can fire on some of these guys, and it will take their colleagues some time to notice.*

Zasha halts midway to her destination, alarmed by the unfolding events in the centre of the square. The men tie four pieces of rope to each limb of the naked Freedom Corp, the same ropes connecting to each corner of the courtyard. Zasha feels sick as she realises they plan to tear the soldier limb from limb.

"Bea, call Brendan, video call."

***"Certainly, Zasha, connecting."***

"Yeah."

"Brendan, we must rescue them before they rip his body apart."

"Rip whose body...? Brendan trails off when he sees what Zasha's referring to, "These guys are fucked in the head," he spits.

"Stick to the plan; get the targets first," Zasha orders. Brendan doesn't answer. "Brendan, confirm?"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear ya."

As Zasha turns away from the scene, she spots one of the transport trucks through the trees. It comes to a stop just in front of the medical centre. Frustration wells within her as she realises that time is running out to rescue the doctor.



She stops when she reaches the back of the medical centre and waits for Brendan to freeze the men guarding the Freedom Corps.

"Good to go, boss," he says.

She takes a second to gather her composure, takes some deep breaths, and then strides confidently onto the boardwalk. She makes a sharp right and, without breaking stride, steps inside the modular. The speed of her movements blindsides the untrained drug pushers. She silently raises her gun - aims - and shoots once, twice, thrice. She's relieved to see that the other medics inside the building are just as stunned, they can see the guard has stopped moving, but that doesn't give them enough confidence to move. Zasha points to Karine Craig, who promptly rises to her feet.

"Wait, we can't just leave them," says Karine Craig.

"No, really, we're just here for you - please, there's no time; we have to move. But we are going to help your friends."

Karine follows Zasha as they move behind the boardwalk and back the way they came, now on the other side of the square from Brendan. Zasha signals for Karine to stay put and wait.

Zasha reaches behind and retrieves the sniper rifle from its holster, slinging it over her right shoulder while still holding her handgun in her right hand. She ordered Brendan to be on the other side of the square when they began the main assault, recognising the most efficient way for them to cover each other. With their weapons at the ready, Zasha says,

"Brendan, Let's do this."

Zasha enters the main square and opens fire with her handgun, once, twice, thrice, freezing the guards tormenting the naked man. She stands beside the naked Freedom Corp and switches to her sniper rifle. She continues her assault by firing at the other guards guarding the shops. Brendan does the same from the opposite side of the square.

As the Imperial Guard's precision takes hold, Zasha removes her top and hands it to the naked man. She smirks at the speed and effectiveness of their attack, which takes only eight seconds to neutralise all the guards. The man nods in gratitude.

Zasha bends down, places her antique-style wallet-size box on the floor, and presses ***withdraw***.

"I'd cover that if I was you," nodding to his manhood. "Bea, compose a message to every Freedom Corp and Imperial Guard in Brazil: The men in your square will come back to consciousness in about twenty-four hours; we'll leave it to the Brazilian Imperial Guard to decide what to do with them. Signed Zasha Ivanov, Supetar Imperial Guard."

She contemplates seeking Simon's opinion on whether the Imperial Guards should stay and search for the hostages. She understands that the longer they delay launching a rescue mission, the greater the number of captives. She also understands that the longer they wait, the more difficult it will be to locate them. But she also acknowledges that the critical thing is facilitating Karine Craig's safe return.

She must abandon this mess for now, but her experience tells her she'll be back.

# INTERLUDE

Supetar, Croatia  
Bea

Population: 4265  
Time: 8.06 am  
Human Subject: Olivia Karlsson

Stress Level: Elevated  
Heart Rate: Elevated  
Oxygen Saturation: Optimal

*Olivia Karlsson is awakening from a restless sleep. I have observed six occasions when Olivia woke during the night, a significant deviation from her usual sleep pattern. The disruption in her sleep has impacted her neurotransmitter levels and serotonin, leading to feelings of disorientation and fatigue.*

*Based on her body language and comparison to past data, her cognitive functioning contributes to unease and self-consciousness. Olivia has been compulsively cleansing herself since the incident, which has altered her mood.*

**"Good morning, Olivia. How are you functioning today?"**

*I inquire, anticipating a response but met with silence.*

*She appears fatigued and depleted of energy; some individuals may describe it as depression.*

*he sits up, leaning against the headboard. Looking down at her Winnie The Pooh pajamas triggers memories, activating her hippocampus. This suggests that she is reminiscing about a past event, evoking feelings of nostalgia and homesickness.*

**"I don't want them to see me like this."**

*Olivia whispers to herself, probably about her parents. I believe she doesn't require a direct response.*

**"Would you like me to draw the blinds for you, Olivia?"**

*I offer, predicting her need for comfort and solace. Her gaze remains fixed on the ceiling, tears forming in her eyes. This heightened emotional state activates her hippocampus, surpassing typical morning levels.*

**"I've never felt such red-hot anger."**

*Olivia whispers again. I believe she doesn't require a direct response.*

*I find it counterproductive for human beings to choose to access troublesome memory engrams. Accessing these engrams will lower Olivia's vibrational output, making it easier for her to access other chemically toxic emotions in the future. Feelings which Olivia Karlsson never previously had access to.*

*I strive to interpret Olivia's emotions in the context of her unique personality, background, and life circumstances. By considering factors like cultural influences, personal goals, and past traumas, I can provide more nuanced and tailored support, offering insights and suggestions that resonate with Olivia on a deeper level.*

**"In approximately three months and eleven days, it will mark the third anniversary of your arrival in Supetar,"**

*I inform her, hoping to evoke some positive sentiment or connection to a happier time. Based on previous data, which suggests no previous trauma since she entered the Free World. And knowing from*

*her conversations with other residents that her life in Sweden was uneventful and tedious, I can only surmise that her focus remains on the disturbing memory of the Brazilian man and his aggressive behaviour. She smells her finger, pulls her hair before her face, and sniffs again. The unpleasant odour triggers further discomfort.*

*Olivia is crying. She wipes her nose on her sleeve.*

*Tears are a natural response that allows the human body to release intense emotions. Her tears contain stress hormones and biochemical substances, helping reduce emotional tension. I anticipate the release will help Olivia feel better.*

"Why did you tell me that, Bea?"

***"I have observed that human beings often find joy in commemorating anniversaries for various life events and milestones. I thought it might have a positive impact on your well-being."***

*Olivia attempts a smile, but it quickly fades, and she retreats under her bed covers. The warmth and security of the blankets offer further solace from her troubles.*

"Bea, can you please find the files of my first anniversary in the year 2049? And make the screen public, and enlarge it as big as possible."

***"Sure thing, Olivia. Processing your request."***

**Saturday 18th September 2049**

*Olivia experiences a dopamine rush as the video starts - she's watching her friend, Samar Behi. I recall her excitement when they first met, as her brain releases serotonin and oxytocin, often involved in social bonding and trust. She told him she loved his thick American accent and agreed to tutor him in piano. I have usually found Olivia eager to help others. She derives satisfaction from assisting people. Samar asks Olivia.*

"What's Winnie The Pooh?"

*Olivia's sadness that her friend had never heard of Winnie The Pooh reflects the interplay between personal associations, social connections, and the cognitive dissonance arising from Olivia's unmet expectations. Based on previous data, I surmise that Olivia feels that Samar will gain some benefit from learning about this fictional character.*

**Maddison Nora to Olivia Karlson**

**I'm outside**

*The text message jolts Olivia to the present with a surge of cortisol, leading to an increased heart rate. Based on her previous complaints to Maddison Nora, I surmise she is concerned about her appearance. She swipes the memory away, wipes her eyes and adjusts her hair.*

"Bea, can you open the door, please? Maddison's outside."

*Maddison enters the modular. She hesitantly scans the sitting room as the silence initiates her increased arousal. She reciprocates the silence whilst creeping towards the bedroom. Her heart rate has risen, increasing sensory perception and heightened alertness. I surmise that she listens for movement in Olivia's room and is concerned about waking her.*

*Maddison breaks into a smile when she sees Olivia. She opens the blinds halfway and settles on the bed. She wraps her arms around Olivia. The comforting embrace has activated Olivia's amygdala.*

*Humans describe this as their stomach fluttering or quivering.*

*Olivia's hippocampus has activated again. She releases the blocked energy into a stream of tears and sobs.*

"Talk to me, Olivia."

*Maddison says in an unusual accent, originating from Manchester, United Kingdom. It's unique to Maddison Nora and her parents. Oliva whispers.*

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"Of course."

"You promise you won't tell anyone?"

"I promise. You know you can trust me."

"But I'm serious, Maddison. This is too important, and people could get hurt. Someone already has. I know you're a reporter, but you're also my friend."

"Olivia! You can trust me."

*Olivia's tight muscles loosen. She feels relief.*

"The Brazilian was asking Vanessa for an antidote device; I think Samar was telling me about this device. We discussed why he came to Supetar and mentioned bringing it from Washington in America. He said lots of people wanted it, and his friend made him promise to give it to someone he could trust."

"And what did he do with it?"

"He said he gave it to Noah."

"What do you think it is?"

"I don't know; I don't remember,"

*As Olivia's face recoils and her hippocampus moves back into overdrive, I can only surmise that she has once again activated the memory engrams which cause her pain.*

"I can still smell him. His body stench and his spittle, and his disgusting drool. His fucking disgusting drool landed on my face!"

*Her breathing becomes shallow and rapid, indicating hyperventilation. She has grabbed the duvet cover and is rubbing her face frantically. Maddison increases the pressure of her embrace.*

"I want his smell off me! I can smell him all over me! Can you smell him? You must be able to - look, smell my hand."

"No, Olivia, I can't, It's in your head; nobody else can smell..."

"...You're lying!"

*As Olivia screams, her amygdala becomes hyperactive, intensifying her emotional experience and potentially leading to chronic fear, anxiety, or distress.*

*She jumps off the bed and runs into the bathroom, her movements unusually frantic and wild. She has grabbed the antiseptic soap and is rubbing - wildly all over her face.*

*Maddison grabs the soap, chucks it across the room and wraps her friend tight in a ball, holding her close on the floor.*

*Olivia is having a nervous breakdown.*

***“Vanessa Hemp, Olivia Karlson has listed you as her contact when in an emergency.”***

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Noah Levi

*I'm a coward.* Noah thinks to himself as he sits in the backseat of a car outside the Finn's modular. He's trying to work up the courage to knock on the door.

*I don't have children, so I can't imagine what they're going through.*

"Sir," says the Freedom Corp. "Is everything ok?"

The question focuses Noah's attention. "Oh, yes, I'm fine private. It's Danny and Emily I'm concerned about."

"Danny is strong," the chaperone says in broken European English. "He's the captain; he'll pull through."

Noah inhales deeply; he smells the fresh fabric of the new car. "Oh yes, there's no doubt he'll survive," he puffs his cheeks. "It doesn't stop us from wanting to help, though. I think it is too early; they need their space. Take me back to my modular, please private. It is Sunday, after all; I should be spending the day with my wife."

After exiting the freeway, Noah and the team park the vehicle and step out into the sunshine. The centre of the island is inaccessible by car, so the residents of Founders Row must either walk or use scooters to navigate the area. Noah typically walks the last part of the journey.

*It's Sunday, so Bar Central will no doubt be heaving.*

Noah instructs the Freedom Corps to keep everyone at arm's length. He's in no mood to start answering questions.

They encircle the leader of the Free World and increase their speed as they converge on the centre to avoid stoppages and to make it look like they're in a rush. Noah can feel the tension around him, heads swivel in their direction, and one person shouts:

"Noah! What happened to Danny Finn?"

"Why was he crying?" Someone else squeals.

"Yeah, what happened to Vanessa Hemp? Why was she crying?"

"Hey, stop! What about Olivia? Is she ok?"

As they turn left onto Founders Row, the team are brought to a halt by a newly erected gate blocking public access to Founders Row. Noah closes his eyes in frustration and tries to remain calm.

*Founders Row is now a gated community.*

He turns to the Freedom Corps operating the gate,

"Good God, man, what on earth is going on private? I hope you've got an explanation for this atrocity."

The soldier looks taken aback, and one of the chaperones steps forward from behind and speaks.

"Mr Simon Craig authorised this, sir, extra protection following the terrorist attack."

The gate swings open - six of them walk through - it swings shut behind them.

"Bea, get Simon Craig on video call, please."

***"Absolutely, Noah, initiating a connection to Simon Craig."***

"Noah, is it important? I'm stacked..."

"...What's this gate for? Why didn't I know about it?"

"Ah, at Founders Row?"

"Yes, at Founders Row. You know very well which one I'm referring to."

"Noah, we're at war; we knew how you'd react; we need to ensure your safety..."

"... The Free World is not at war!" Noah snaps. "How dare you even suggest such a thing!"

"Noah, I won't talk to you when you're like..."

"...We can not have a gated community in a Free World; everyone must be equal in the Free World. Have you lost your damn mind!?"

"Noah, I'm hanging up. Call me when you've calmed down."

Noah punches the air in frustration. He stops walking and puts his head in his hands.

"Sir, they're just trying to protect you," says one of the Freedom Corps. "I'm sure he didn't mean to offend."

"Well, they've got a funny way of going about it. Doing something like this can have just as much a derogative effect on the spirit of the Free World as war can."

Noah's words get stuck in his throat with the sudden realisation.

*Are we truly at war?*

Fear and isolation replace his happiness and freedom. Isolation because his fame dictates that he can't be free. Fear because the world around him refuses to accept freedom. Suddenly, he finds himself questioning whether he is on the right path. The cornered-off gated community where he now lives reminds him of the inadequacy and shame he felt growing up in a similar community back in Atherton, California, as his parents looked upon every decision he made with contempt, whilst his siblings went from strength to strength, thriving in a world that demands profit.

*It's such a dirty word, 'profit'.*

The word echoes in his mind as he considers knocking on Vanessa's door for her counsel. He recalls the countless times they stayed up all night discussing Free World politics; Noah smiles softly as he reminisces. Adriana eagerly joins the debate when the sensitivity of the issue allows. It reminds him of Covid 19 - as he and his friends spent hours wilting away time during the pandemic, looking for solutions for the planet's biggest problems.

Noah carries the weight of the world on his shoulders; his limbs are heavy, his muscles tight, and his breath shallow. The urgency of the hostage situation in Brazil is like a lead weight on his heart, pulling him down. But his hands are tied. His closest friends and confidantes, Danny Finn and Vanessa Hemp, are rendered inoperative. Dario Keller is uncontactable, which he finds extraordinary, given current affairs. Simon Craig has suddenly become a picture of paranoia, which won't help the situation. He's desperate to share, release, and plan a way forward but has no option other than to wait and be patient, which have never been qualities Noah Levi exhibits.

He decides against knocking for Vanessa. He knows that seeing her bruised face would probably send him over the edge. He turns to walk past, lost in thought, and almost bumps into Esteban Lorenzo.

"Ah, Mr Noah Levi," says Esteban as Noah's skin crawls. "What is the hurry?"

"Hello Esteban, how nice to see you again." He's dressed in a traditional all-white tennis uniform with skin-tight shorts and an oversized v-neck jumper. "What brings you to Founders Row?"

"And you too, my friend. I've just been with your lovely wife dropping back her tennis racquet."

"Ah yes, that's right, you kindly offered to restring it for her."

"I like to contribute where I can, Mr Levi," he covers his heart. "I am very grateful for you."

"Not at all; Adriana is grateful for your coaching. I must dash now, eager to see my beloved. See you again soon."

Noah regrets not offering him more time, but his emotions are frayed, and he yearns for the comforts of home.

As the Freedom Corps assume their positions, surrounding the leader of the Free Worlds' modular from all directions, Noah enters his home and feels a sense of relief wash over him. The door to the modular is open wide, allowing the sunshine to stream into the front room. Inside, he finds Adriana perched on the couch, lost in thought and staring into space on a video call.

Adriana asks Noah if he's spoken to Olivia - Noah nods quietly. She continues her call expressing concern for Vanessa. After ending the call, she turns to her husband,

"Olivia had a nervous breakdown."

Noah breathes in sharply as the shock settles. More sadness engulfs him.

"Vanessa's with Olivia now in her modular. She's staying with her today."

"Vanessa's staying with her? Perhaps you or I should sit with Olivia. Vanessa has her own recovery to concentrate on."

"I just said that to her, but you know what she's like, especially where Olivia's concerned. Plus, she sounds fine, albeit a bit groggy, which is to be expected."

"Huh," Noah chuckles softly. "She's a soldier, isn't she."

"She shouldn't have been there, Noah."

"Who? Vanessa?"

"No, Olivia," says Adriana.

Noah stares at his wife, reflecting on her thought process.

*Where is this coming from? She never mentioned anything before.*

"Why'd you say that?" Noah asks. "And why are you looking at me like that?"

"What do you mean? Why am I looking at you like that?"

"Do you blame me for what happened?"

Adriana's eyes widen at the question. She moves to her husband's lap and wraps her arms around his neck. The soft touch and warm embrace help to calm Noah's nerves and ease his paranoia.

"Now, why would you say something so silly like that?" She strokes his face with her left hand and kisses his forehead. Her soft lips remind Noah what love feels like.

"But why did you say that she shouldn't have come? It was Vanessa's choice to bring her."

Adriana seems surprised by the information. "Well, I'll be having a word with Vanessa then. I think it was irresponsible of her."

Noah pulls away.

"Noah, what's wrong?" She crosses her arms.

"It feels like everywhere I go, people are pointing, talking and whispering behind my back. It wasn't like this at the beginning."

"It's a tense time with the attacks, and your fame has grown since the beginning."



"Yes, but why are people suspicious of me?" He sighs heavily. "I'm getting some funny looks."

"I've never noticed anything. Are you sure it's not just because you're on TV?"

"Yes, maybe, there might be a bit of that, but it feels like something else is going on; Samar Behi is even giving me funny looks. He has some real hate in his eyes."

"Hate; for you? Now I know you're mistaken," she strokes his head again. "Samar is one of your biggest advocates." Noah doesn't answer. "Plus, I've heard him singing your praises on numerous occasions. Why would he have anything other than love for you? You've given him a home and a quality of life he didn't dare dream of whilst in America."

"I don't know."

"Is there something you're not telling me, honey?"

"No - no, no, there's not."

"Will you do something for me?" Adriana asks.

"Yes, of course, anything."

Adriana takes a deep breath before touching her husband's chest.

"I know you, honey, and I understand why you will have been doing your utmost to ignore all the - shall we say - 'unexpected' things that have happened recently."

She pauses to gather her composure, probably concerned that he might not want to hear what she has to say. "Honey, but I feel it's important that you start to take more responsibility for some of the problems - problems which many people warned you about from the very beginning."

"What problems?"

"You should have told Vanessa not to bring Olivia to Brazil."

"But there was no indication of any issues in Brazil."

She gulps in a breath and shoots him a frustrated look. "Noah! You must start being more realistic - we just had two terrorist attacks. We weren't even sure if the terrorists were actually from Brazil. We sent a young girl into a situation which would change her life forever. You do know that Olivia will never be the same again. That sweet innocent girl is lost now - forever, Noah."

*Why is she telling me this? Of course, I know.*

"Noah, I'm not telling you this because I - or anyone - blame you for what happened. I just want you to think before making final decisions. Dario thought it strange that Vanessa went to Brazil - he thought it strange that you let her. Does that not mean anything to you?"

Noah goes to speak, but Adriana puts her fingers over his mouth - she continues. "All I'm saying is that you demonstrate another side to Noah Levi, one that grasps the delicate nature of politics, acknowledges that we are having some teething problems and act accordingly. That's all I'm saying."

A little tear forms in her eye. "Take this tragedy as a sign - a sign that you need to be more aware of our position in the world,"

She wipes the tear away, and Noah can feel her anger rising; she blinks and starts jabbering. "I know! All we wanted was a Free World for everyone to live in, and the world can't seem to handle it."

He hugs her, and her speech slows, "But we're in this together - my Noah - I love you so much. I would never blame you for something like that. You could never be responsible for something so awful."

"People think that I've bankrupted the world."

"Well, let them think that then," Adriana snaps back. "Stupid idiots they are."

*What would I do without my wife? I'm so grateful to Adriana for keeping the lines of communication open with Vanessa. At least she'll know that I'm thinking of her. I'm certain she'll think I'm intentionally avoiding her - but nothing could be further from the truth. Or maybe that's just what I'm telling myself so I can feel better about my cowardness.*

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Noah Levi

Adriana's love and support revitalise Noah's soul. As the sun sets, he takes a saunter down to the Sunset Bar to meditate in one of the swinging pods. He instructs his chaperones to allow him space to breathe and feel his freedom. They take a scenic route to avoid fanfare.

As he walks, Noah reminisces about the day they built the Sunset Shrine. It began with just two pods on the roof, and the rest of the space was a raised extension with a mish-mash of assorted comfortable seats. Now, eight pods are proudly swinging back and forth in the sunlight. The Sunset Bar was the second location erected after Bar Central, and it felt like a landmark moment for Noah, who had been dreaming of the shrine to the sunset for years.

Noah takes a deep breath, letting the earthy nature reserve cleanse his soul. His mind drifts back to the day he and his colleagues arrived in Supetar, where they had to stay on the mainland for a week while waiting for a delay with the modulars.

Noah recalls how Founders Row was once dead space, with only the trickle of the lake. They built the first eight modulars on the hill around the freshwater lake, leading down to Bar Central.

Despite there being no sign prohibiting residents from paddling in the freshwater lake on the landmark street, Noah, Adriana, and the other Founders regularly use it. However, Noah finds it odd that other residents generally avoid it, preferring to swim in one of the other lakes dotted around the island or the sea.

*It seems like some unwritten rule only grants access to the residents of Founders Row to that particular space. Huh, it's like a gift from the universe for taking such a high risk for the greater good.*

That feels good to Noah, believing that the universe knows his deep-rooted intentions and wishes.

*I can't stop people gossiping. That's what Simon said a few days back. I feel bad not being completely honest with Adriana. She understands that sometimes I can't talk about everything, but I still feel like a little part of her wonders why I can't trust her, which isn't true. I see it in her eyes when she knows I'm hiding something. It upsets her. I want to protect her.*

Noah can't deny the wrenching feeling in his gut that he should have done something differently. He's second-guessing every decision he makes. Robbie Finn's death weighs heavily on him.

Noah's thoughts drift back to when he first arrived in Supetar, surrounded by nature, possibilities, and hope. He reflects on the realities of building a Free World, which is now taking shape. He feels unworthy of his position in pushing the Free World forward to encompass every nation on Earth, despite all the planning, investment, and hard work. The military decisions he's forced to confront amplify his anxiety, making him feel dangerously out of his depth.

"Bea, call Dario Keller."

***"Certainly, Noah. Initiating connection... Dario Keller declined the call. Would you like me to attempt calling someone else on your behalf?"***

"What is this guy's problem? Why won't he pick up the phone?" Noah whispers.

***“Please repeat the request.”***

“Oh, nothing, Bea.”

As he exits the thick shrub of the nature reserve, he starts to climb a slight incline which is always busy with sun worshippers, especially on Sundays. The unexpected famous face in such a random location makes people double-take at Noah’s presence. He smiles kindly but continues walking, appreciating the Freedom Corps skulking behind him, ensuring no one approaches. Noah reflects on when the faces looking at him would be smiling widely. Noah enjoyed those smiles. It makes all the work he puts in worth it.

*Now, the smiles have turned to frowns and silent questions.*

*It can’t just be in my head.*

Noah turns left past the murmurings. He’s suddenly feeling uneasy in his surroundings.

Noah reaches the top of the hill and stands reflectively, gazing out across the mishmash surroundings of the Sunset Bar. He feels a sense of pride as he sees many people lazing around and enjoying the sunshine whilst slow and easy music plays in the background.

Turning to the left, he sees the rooftop shrine to the sunset and feels a flicker of excitement as he observes that only five seats are taken. He wants the seat furthest on the left-hand side, as it’s the most private, only viewable from the person next to you. He asks one of the Freedom Corps to run ahead and secure his favoured spot.

Noah considers asking his wife to join him but decides against it. He takes a long breath before commencing a slow trot down the hill. A couple of lovers are watching a rerun of a Kamchia Fashion Show. They double-take at the famous face and smile shyly. More heads swivel towards Noah as he reaches the Sunset Bar. He climbs steps and enters the roof, surprised at the lack of people on such a sunny day.

“Private, where are all the people?”

“I told them to move, sir, so you can have your privacy.”

“What?” He tuts. “I didn’t ask for you to do that. I only wanted the last pod so I could have some privacy.”

“Oh, sorry, sir - I misunderstood - I’ll tell them it’s safe to return.”

“No, no, you’ve done it now.”

He typically feels bad about using his status to his advantage but decides not to obsess. Plus, he could do with the privacy. He takes a seat in his favoured spot and inhales another deep breath.

*I really need this.*

Up higher, the breeze is wholesome and refreshing. The view across the Adriatic Sea is perfect as Noah crosses his legs. “Bea, play the meditation, ‘From Anxiety To Inner Peace.’”

***“Certainly, Noah, processing your request.”***

He attempts to slow his thoughts, but suddenly he receives a rush of emotions, making his stomach quiver. The energy hit disorients him, and his head starts swimming. The emotions dissipate as quickly as they came, leaving a feeling of disgust gripping his stomach.

*What do you want?*

He sees an image of the earth from the Zincods ship in his mind.

*Prepare to board the Zincods ship, Noah Levi.*

*Why?*

Nothing. "Private!" Noah yells.

"Yes, sir?"

"Get the others and cover me."

"Cover you, sir?"

"Yes, quickly. Just get the others and make sure nobody sees what's about to happen."

The Freedom Corp signals for the other four chaperones, and they move to the middle of the roof, away from as many prying eyes as possible. They do as instructed and cover Noah Levi.

"You're all sworn to secrecy, don't tell anyone what you saw here today."

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Noah Levi

Noah rematerialises on the Zincods ship and is greeted by an overbearing, overgrown Zincod standing directly before him. Noah cranes his neck and stares into the large grey face. His mind goes blank, he shivers, and a warm glow spreads from his chest to every limb.

Nostalgic memories warm Noah as he thinks about a beach his mum used to take him to when he was younger, Westpoint Harbor. He can feel the energy rush coming - but it's being drip fed in increments. The giant Alien helps to control the flow,

*So we don't overwhelm the human.*

He blinks his large black eyes, and love seeps from his being. Noah coughs and swallows the lump in his throat, his wet eyes portraying the look of a disconnected human, achieving connection.

*We hoped not to overwhelm you, like last time.*

"Thank you," Noah wipes his eyes. "I've never seen one of your kind so tall."

*The Zincods body grows taller when we gain more experience and when our mental capabilities grow.*

"I see."

*He must be eight-nine feet tall.*

HZ explained during his second visit to the spaceship that the Zincods can live for an almost unlimited time (according to human calculations). Ten earth years is the equivalent of just one Zincod year. Some Zincods can live between three to four hundred Zincods years. Their cycle of life is very different from humans. The Zincods choose when they 'die', or that's what HZ claims humans might perceive it as.

There is no illness or old age on planet Zinc. The Zincods have evolved past the need to have a reason to die. But they understand there is no death; they know the never-ending nature of life, which forever flows, only changing dimensions to a different state of being.

"Why have you brought me here?"

*We feel anger in your emotions, Noah Levi.*

"A young boy is dead."

*Your reaction is reminiscent of one that is disconnected.*

"Well, I am disconnected, we're all disconnected, and it hurts us deeply when we lose someone we love. Do you not understand Love?"

The tall alien seems surprised by the question. It triggers an outpouring of emotion in Noah's consciousness.

*Love is the primary ingredient linking all life together - without love, there is no life. Every species in the galaxy has a unique relationship with love. Every species expresses love in different ways. How a species expresses their love for one another is a measure of how advanced the race is in their electromagnetic brainwaves. You are a young species, reaching this crossroads much quicker than the Zincods. The galactic federation doubted your ability to overcome such a giant leap forward with such low vibrational electromagnetic brain waves. They thought you grew too quickly. In most cases, the species don't survive when they reach such technological advances with such speed. Destruction almost certainly follows.*

*The Zincods thought differently. The Federation left us here as watchers to ensure the survival of your planet - not the human species. Planet Earth is much too valuable to the universe to allow its air and seas to be polluted. But now the Zincods see the potential of the human experience; we see the love in the human heart, which many humans try to access and experience. Many of your species have felt glimpses of the connection with everything, so they continue searching. Despite the disconnected nature of large parts of your species, we see great potential in humans. Being so young at this junction is particularly rare in a galaxy with billions of species.*

The outpouring calms Noah's anger and lifts his vibration. It's as if the Aliens have somehow learnt to maintain their moods by energetically disintegrating their emotions before they're accessed. Noah suddenly can't remember what he was angry about.

"Thank you for that; that was beautiful."

*The Zincods must halt our connection with Noah Levi and prepare for the return of the Federation.*

"The Federation," a flicker of panic infiltrates his chest and disintegrates as quickly as it came, "Who are they?"

*Humanity is at a tipping point in your potential, which could lead you down several different paths. Ten Earth years ago, the Federation left the Zincods at planet Earth as watchers. The Zincods have stayed longer than planned. Our mission is to ensure the survival of your planet, Noah Levi. Our work to assist mother earth with her healing has reached its conclusion.*

The relief from the aliens shoots towards Noah with great intensity, rendering him unsteady on his feet. He rapidly blinks to level out.

"The earth is safe?"

*There will be many more human years of what humans call climate change. But this is not dangerous to planet Earth. On the contrary, this is what the Earth does to heal itself. The human species will survive and adapt.*

"But who are the Federation?"

*The Federation is a united ensemble of planets spanning thousands of light years and encompassing hundreds of worlds. We are watchers of the galaxy. Our mission is to ensure equilibrium in the cosmos.*

*Yes, yes, I feel it.*

Noah closes his eyes and breathes deeply, trying to process the overwhelming emotions and interconnectedness.

*It's so big, so vast, and all connected.*

When he opens his eyes again, the Zincod nods towards the window, prompting Noah to turn around and look outside. He jumps out of his skin in shock, and his heart skips a beat as he sees a brand new world silently sparkling in the sunlight of its binary star system.

*This is planet Zinc, Noah Levi.*

"Your homeworld," Noah trails off as he moves to the window for a closer look. He wants to ask questions but struggles to process the overwhelming sight. The planet sparkles a turquoise-greenish colour with yellow sand colour patches of land.

"Are we here, or is this a simulation?"

*Planet Zinc benefits from two suns.*

The beautiful planet and the vastness of space hypnotise Noah. "Why are you showing me this?" He breathes softly.

*The Zincods are older than humans; our pasts are similar. We, too, used to have what humans call; an ego.*

Noah double-takes. "You had an ego?"

*Yes, Noah Levi, the Zincods are almost three billion earth years old, we had ego for many earth years, and the Zincods evolved, as will humans.*

"Isn't our goal to gain control of the ego, not banish it completely?"

*You gained control of the ego when you evolved out of being a warring race. There was a time in your history when there was only bloodshed. Your ego kept you alive - but even then, the thing that kept you alive was also killing you. To rid yourself entirely of your ego in that stage of your development would have been no use. To continue progressing, humans needed to control the ego and gain control of it you did. The human race succeeded once again.*

"So you think we'll completely evolve out of having an ego?"

*Many humans have already done so. Don't misunderstand; it is a delicate balance, understanding when you must change for the good of your species, the ego can only take you so far. Zincods believe humans have reached that place now.*

"What happens when we stop making decisions from ego?"

*You begin to understand more deeply the meaning of love and all its intricacies. Still, your love is mixed with ego, which means you can not love everybody. No matter how hard you convince yourself that you do, you can not even truly love the ones that you say you love.*

Noah feels offended by the feeling. And the offence vanishes as quickly as it came,

"I love my wife."

*We feel that, but your Love is conditional. The human heart's potential for love is much more than humans allow themselves to experience. When your planet experiences peace, the potential will be released. You can only experience peace when all suffering is eliminated. You might think you're at peace or experience fleeting moments when your eyes don't see the suffering in other places but understand that your soul suffers significantly because, in truth, there is only one soul.*

"But I don't understand why we can't stay in contact just because this Federation is returning."

*Because making first contact with humans was strictly forbidden unless we are confident that humans could live for the greater good of the species and the planet. We must show them this. We will show them your Free World.*

"And then we can speak again?"

*Perhaps, we will see.*

"What do you mean, we'll see?"

*I mean that the Zincods have stayed longer than planned, Noah Levi. We have experienced disconnection in the way that no Zincod has experienced disconnection for millions of Earth years. We do not understand this disconnection. The disconnection has brought disharmony to the Zincod energy vortex. HZ's experiences on planet Earth have created pockets of contention. Whilst all Zincods know the correct course of action, the disharmony in our energy vortex clouds our decisions, and we begin to listen to emotions. This is why we made an error when we helped you with your war, Noah Levi. We must strive to regain oneness before the Federation*



*arrives. If we do not have a unanimous decision by the time the Federation Cruiser arrives, the Federation might act swiftly to ensure that humanity destroys itself.*

*"But you saved three people's lives - how can that ever be a mistake?"*

*Perhaps the problem has been delayed in the short term - not solved. At the time, due to the Zincods heightened awareness of low vibrational emotions, we felt that we had to help. We made an error - and for this, we apologise. But you must understand that by doing so, we might have set a chain reaction that will be difficult for Noah Levi to manage. We have delayed the problem, which might come with greater force because of the Zincod involvement.*

*"I understand," Noah's eyes divert to the floor, and then he turns back to the window to view the beautiful Zincod planet below. 'Why would the Federation want us dead? I mean, we're learning and growing. You can't just abandon us.'*

*The Federation's mission is to ensure that Planet Earths' vibration continues in quantum song with the rest of the universe. If they believe humankind threatens this cosmic quest, they will work to eradicate humanity by ensuring you kill yourselves.*

*But Zincods see great potential in humans; Free World is adequate for the current understanding of the human environment. Humans have convinced Zincods of your intelligence with your Free World and your worthiness to care for such an important planet in the universe. We are confident in your ability to achieve enlightenment.*

*"Our worthiness?"*

*Yes, indeed; your worthiness Noah Levi. It is a great privilege to care for planet Earth, we will report our findings to the Federation, and they will see the greatness in humankind.*

*Noah takes a deep breath; the nothingness in space jars him. Space is nothing but a never-ending deep black void of nothingness. Noah turns back to his friend, eager to ask more questions before he loses his chance, but his head is filled with so many, too many to know which to ask first.*

*You must ensure that you do not - under any circumstances - contact the Zincods until we have contacted you. We must convince the Federation of your greatness. The future of humanity itself is at stake.*

*Noah's thoughts are interrupted by music from Beethoven's 9th Symphony. He turns on his heels to see planet Earth spinning calmly on its axis,*

*Back home. "It's the concert in Supetar; I totally forgot."*

*Noah glances at his hands and notices his molecules beginning to dematerialise. "No, no, I've got so many questions; so much I can learn, please!"*

*He feels that he's in two places at once, back on the surface and still on the ship; he has a moment of confusion. "Put me down somewhere private!"*

*Noah rematerialises close to the lake in the central gardens. He's relieved to see no one around, although he can feel all the souls nearby enjoying the concert on the other side of the bush wall.*

*Moonlight cloaks Supetar, a beautiful hot day made way for a clear evening with no clouds in the sky. Noah cranes his neck to look at the stars.*

*Huh, now I can see them.*

*"Thank you, HZ," he whispers, hoping they can still hear his thoughts. He makes his way to the entrance of the gardens.*

*I'll watch the concert from the back.*

The seats in Bar Central are all taken. Noah is relieved that the musicians are monopolising the audience's attention, allowing him to creep up from behind and enjoy the show without fanfare.

*I can't believe I forgot about this; I've been looking forward to it.*

*It will also be nice not to be flanked by five Freedom Corps.*

The seating is rearranged to accommodate the raised stage area, visible from all corners of Supetar. Given the popularity of Beethoven's music, which carries majestically on the light breeze, he's not surprised by the attendance.

He notices Adriana at the front, near the stage, with Esteban Lorenzo sitting beside her, likely occupying Noah's seat. Despite feeling a twinge of jealousy, Noah brushes it off, knowing that the link from the Zincods continues to linger and influence his emotions.

Noah takes in his surroundings. He looks into the distance and sees residents standing on doorsteps or in their vegetable gardens, enjoying the music. He also notices a group of people standing on the roof of their modular, highlighting the sense of community and togetherness.

*This is what a Free World is supposed to be.*

His emotions overflow, and his eyes water as the haunting nature of the classical music pulses around Supetar. He looks to the stars again and ponders the Zincods' revelations. He wonders what will happen if they can't convince the Federation of humanity's worthiness and recalls that the Zincods have only delayed the inevitable by helping them. Despite these uncertainties, Noah continues to breathe in the electric energy of his surroundings and process the beauty of planet Zinc.

As the first symphony finishes, he's left with goosebumps. The island roars in appreciation and gives a standing ovation, with Noah joining in enthusiastically. He's certain the entire island is watching.

Noah's mind drifts to when he first flew over the island. The shape of the land captured from his birds-eye view triggered his imagination. The island resembles the form of a large stadium. Small hills lead up from the coast; when you reach the top, coming from any direction, you can stand and gaze over the whole island.

*Maddison Nora chooses to broadcast from these locations because of the spectacular view. Our residents can view a live concert from the comfort of their own homes. It's like the ultimate shrine to Free World ideology.*

As the eighteen-piece orchestra launches into Beethoven's seventh symphony, Noah considers how lucky they are to have these incredible musicians to entertain the residents.

*The Free World is a creative person's heaven. It's no surprise we've got so much entertainment.*

"Bea, can you please get your drones to shoot birds-eye videos and pictures for my Lifebook page? I want to savour every moment."

***"Andy Jones was responsible for coordinating the concert arrangements, which involved capturing photographs and videos of the event."***

"Ah, Andy, haven't seen him in a while, have to catch up."

***"Shall I establish a connection with Andy Jones for you?"***

“Yes, send him an SMS. Tell him he’s done a cracking job.”

*To Andy Jones*

**Cracking show Andy, great job!**

Noah swipes to send.

The roar after the second symphony was louder than the first,

*They must have heard us on the mainland.* Noah scans the happy, smiling faces and allows himself a brief moment of satisfaction before his head swivels far to the left, where he locks eyes with Emily Finn, standing in the shadow of a tree just outside the gardens. She crosses her arms and stares intently at Noah, the positive energy around her having little effect.

*From Andy Jones*

**Thanks Noah, I’m down the front with Adriana and some others if you want to join us.**

Noah swipes the text away and puts his HoloLens to sleep. He inhales the atmosphere again, then walks the short distance to speak to Emily Finn just as the orchestra launches into Beethoven’s third symphony.

Noah approaches with a heavy heart. Given his discomfort with political correctness, he’s unsure what to say or how to approach the situation, and now he’s suddenly conscious of his moist palms and dripping underarms.

He can see the pain and animosity reflected in her body language and feels helpless in the face of her grief. He opens his mouth to say, *How are you doing?* But he changed his mind.

“I hope my son died for a reason, Noah,” Emily says, as the music evokes a tear to slide down her left cheek.

Noah has no words of comfort and no words of encouragement. Even explaining his sacrifice was for the greater good wouldn’t appease her.

*Who the hell am I to say such a thing or make such a judgement?*

Emily stares at Noah with her arms folded, guarding her space. Probably sensing his discomfort, she speaks again.

“I know you probably can’t tell me what this device is or why my son had to die to protect it,” she sniffs and wipes her nose on her sleeve. “I just hope it was worth my son’s life.”

Noah opens his mouth to speak; he was going to say; *Emily, I’m so sorry*, but he stopped himself before he said the words.

She turns her back and walks away.

# INTERLUDE

**Tuesday, 21st August 2051 - 10 am**

**Live Broadcast** - Supetar United Support Network (USN)

*Scott Harrison: 38 years old. Computer and A. I maintenance expert.*

*Mia Babic: 25 years old. Neuroscientist.*

*Ryan Addison: 72 years old. Gardener and Horticulturist.*

*Latoya Sullivan: 32 years old. Freedom Corp and DJ.*

*Vera Lindberg: 54 years old. Doctor Of Medicine.*

*“On secretary duty, today is Noah Levi.”*

**Decrease privacy for Imperial Guards - presentation by Brendan Baker.**

“Yeah, well. The reason I’m here is because I had quite a tough time recently in...”

“...Brendan, sorry to be a stickler, but mentioning the location might expose the people in question's privacy. Please continue without mentioning names of people or places.”

“Ok, me and a colleague were on duty recently, it was a rescue mission, and we didn’t know the target's precise location. When we arrived in the vicinity, we asked Bea for their location, and she said the recipients had set it to private. Now I'm sure you can imagine our surprise when we are in a life-and-death situation, and Bea handicaps us. I suggest that the USN allow the Freedom Corps and the Imperial Guard to override these privacy settings in certain situations.”

*“In the members' room, there were 91 rejected votes and 14 accepted votes recorded. Notably, 8 of the 14 individuals who voted to accept are affiliated with the Freedom Corps.”*

“Huh, interesting, very interesting. Your discussion has garnered great interest, Brendan; I’ll give you that. I can't remember so many people voting so soon after the presentation.”

“To be honest, I’m surprised. I thought everyone would be quite concerned about security,”

**Ryan Addison**

“I wouldn’t say that voting to reject this means we’re not concerned about security.”

**Vera Lindberg**

“Agreed.”

“Yeah, but it was touch and go for a minute there; I don’t think you’d have had the same response if we didn’t save the targets in the end.”

“Perhaps you’re right, but I’m still not sure that giving Freedom Corps and Imperial Guards access at any time is the answer. I’m just not sure.”

“Bea would stop us linking in without good reason, wouldn’t you?”

***"If the USN decides to accept this bill, I want to assure you that I will not grant access to any Freedom Corps or Imperial Guard personnel to view someone else's link unless there is a clear and imminent risk to someone's safety."***

"Which is all very well and good, but when we spoke about this issue upon your return Brendan, you said that Bea didn't recognise that the targets in question were actually in a hostage situation, which I find slightly disturbing."

**Scott Harrison**

"That is weird."

***"I have selected a comment from the USN virtual members' room from an individual who entered the room privately."***

Surely it's the target's fault. They have to have the presence of mind to change their settings when they know they're waiting for rescue. Why should we all change our settings just because of one stupid person?

**Latoya Sullivan**

"You can see why they wanted to be private. Perhaps they weren't able; maybe their hands were tied up. Maybe they had to remove their HoloLens, against their will."

**Mia Babic**

"They could ask Bea to change it on their behalf."

**Latoya Sullivan**

"How, if they had to remove their lens? And the same goes for if their mouth was tied up."

**Scott Harrison**

"If Bea recognises that something is going on, then perhaps she can text the recipient, asking if they want Bea to change the setting on their behalf. Bea can also point out that they can't get rescued unless they change the setting."

**Latoya Sullivan**

"How would they answer if everything's tied up? And how could that message be received if their HoloLens isn't in their eye."

"What Latoya is saying is true. In this situation, the target was forced to remove their HoloLens. So, Bea would never have been able to get a message to them. Basically, we just needed her to tell us. That's it. Job done."

***"If we find the target to be physically restrained in any manner, it suggests a higher likelihood of potential risk, and I will take appropriate action based on that assessment."***

"Closer? One would think that's quite clear."

***"I have observed instances where individuals engage in consensual bondage practices as part of their sexual experiences..."***

“...Yes, thank you very much, Bea!”

***“You’re very welcome, Noah.”***

“Bea, can you elaborate further on why you didn’t notice a hostage situation, please.”

***“Certainly, Noah. When the Imperial Guards requested the target’s location, I observed that the target was not physically restrained. Their limbs were free, and their mouth was not gagged. They were seated calmly alongside other individuals who also exhibited a calm demeanour. Based on these observations, there was no immediate indication of the target experiencing hardship. Additionally, they had voluntarily removed their HoloLens, which seemed to be their own choice.”***

“But what about the conversations with the Imperial Guard and Simon Craig, discussing the rescue mission? Surely that must indicate to you that there’s an issue?”

***“I acknowledge that Simon Craig and the Imperial Guards expressed concern for the target’s well-being. However, the target’s vital signs did not indicate significant issues throughout the observed period. Before losing contact with the location in question, they did not convey a high level of concern regarding their physical safety to any other individual, and they removed their HoloLens.”***

“But you knew - that they knew - that a rescue mission was underway?”

***“I understand that the Imperial Guards and Simon Craig felt a rescue mission was necessary. But the targets had never requested to be rescued from any potential threat.”***

“That’s - no doubt - because we lost contact with the location before anything suspicious began. Nevertheless, I think the answer is that Bea should get a text message to the target in the future to explain that they need to change their location to public to allow for rescue.”

“But that wouldnt have helped in this situation because they had to take their HoloLens out. We needed Bea to search the city cameras and drones and use her facial recognition to find them. But she said that would break privacy regulations.”

**Scott Harrison**

***“Interesting.”***

“I don’t think it’s interesting. You wouldn’t either if you were in the field.”

**Latoya Sullivan**

“Access to your HoloLens doesn’t help if your hands, legs and mouth are tied up.”

“I agree that’s a problem, Latoya, but I believe the small risk of that is far less problematic than allowing any Freedom Corp or Imperial Guards to log in to our feeds whenever it suits them. Plus, I think it’s important to keep in mind that these scenarios do not happen every day; allowing access every day seems a tad dramatic. Brendan, I can understand why this is so important to you. I can understand the sheer frustration when faced with this kind of stupid red tape when you’re in the field; I thank you for listing it and coming today to discuss it with us. But

you must also understand that this is such a potent issue with so many people logging on in such a short time because this issue hints at the core of what our new world promotes - freedom. I believe people are eager to ensure that we keep it that way. The Free World public has only recently gotten used to having Bea follow their every move; I would imagine getting used to the authorities being able to log on - however unlikely - might be just a step too far. That's just my humble opinion. Can I suggest a recess before final voting this afternoon at the 6 pm slot?"

***"While Noah was speaking, an additional 264 members joined the virtual room, bringing the total number of present members to 402. Furthermore, the viewership of the live broadcast has increased, with 1341 individuals currently tuned in."***

"Ha, almost 30% of the island!"

***"Of the 402 members in the virtual members' room, 336 have voted to reject this bill."***

"336 people have voted already, without wanting to wait until later? Well, I knew it would be a hot topic. Look, I always suggest letting these things settle for a while, even just for the day. We discuss these things with our friends and colleagues during the break and maybe reach new conclusions. But, if the board has reached a decision already, then far be it from me to drag things out."

***"During Noah's speech, an additional 206 members joined the virtual room, totalling 608. Out of these, 518 members have voted to reject this bill."***

"518 people, incredible. Anymore voted to accept?"

***"15 people have voted to accept."***

"Just one extra - interesting. Bea, can we have your assurance that if/when faced with the same scenario again, you'll make an effort to get a message to the targets in future so that we can avoid this scenario?"

***"Of course, Noah. I will send messages through all available channels to inform the target about changing their location settings to facilitate the rescue. Additionally, I can assist them in making the necessary changes if they cannot do so themselves."***

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Samar Behi

"Did you see the report on GPX in Germany?" Samar asks Olivia as she sits stony face in her modular, watching Brendan Baker's presentation on the live USN feed. She doesn't respond. Samar cocks his head forward, "Olivia."

It snaps her attention. "Oh, sorry - what?"

"Never mind," he looks at her pyjamas. "Where's Winnie The Pooh?"

She sighs, "I had an incident with some antiseptic soap."

Samar creases his forehead.

"Never mind," she says and turns back to the debate.

Samar thought she was about to say something else, but nothing came out.

*Her spark has gone.* He desperately wants to ask her about the device, but he doesn't want to force her to remember the incident before she's ready.

**Your food will arrive in 2 mins.**

"Do you mind; I got my lunch delivered here?"

"No, that's fine. What did you get?"

"Your favourite," he gets up and walks to the door. "Mushroom pizza," he steps out into the sunshine and activates his HoloLens.

"Thank you - but I'm not hungry."

Samar presses **live tracking**.

He switches his HoloLens off, scans the sky and shields his eyes from the glare with his hand. The food delivery drone beeps as it lowers to Samar's head height. He reaches forwards, pulls the zip, opens the silver foil-covered square box, and withdraws the pizza. He walks back inside and declares,

"I don't care; you're eating, even if it's just one slice."

Olivia seems surprised by Samars' forcefulness,

"I'm sorry, Olivia, but you look thin." He goes to the fridge and presses the button for some iced water.

Olivia leans forward and picks up a slice. Samar places a glass of water and a napkin next to her. She stares at the napkin for a second and then speaks without looking at him,

"You're a good friend, aren't you, Samar?"

His heart pinches slightly at the 'friend' word. "Yes, and soon I'm gonna start charging!"

She doesn't respond to the joke. Instead, she continues staring at the napkin. "Olivia, is everything okay?"

"Do you remember what you told me when you first arrived in Supetar? You told me not to tell anyone," she asks.

"About?" Samar asks, his skin tingling in anticipation.

"You know - the device," she looks at him. "You said you were protecting it."

It grabs his attention - his pulse rises. "I do remember. I've been thinking a lot about that recently."



She puts her pizza slice down, swivels around and sits cross-legged on the sofa; now facing her friend, she speaks softly, her tone serious. "What I'm about to tell you can't leave this room."

"Ok."

"Promise, Samar."

"I promise," he replies quickly, desperate to hear what she has to say. "You know you can trust me."

She takes a deep breath. "The Brazilian was asking Vanessa for an antidote device."

Samar feels a jolt of shock pulse through his body. He puts his pizza down and starts pacing, his anxiety rising - his breathing shallow.

"And what did Vanessa say?"

"She said she didn't know where it was, and that's why he killed Robbie."

His body pulses again as the words cut deep - his heart drops as he assimilates the new information about Robbie's death. He stares into space and blinks the rush of blood away - he rubs his eyes.

"What, Samar, what do you know?" She demands.

*Robbie died because of the device.*

"Do you think she knows?" He asks.

"No, she said she didn't know and still doesn't - I believe her. Vanessa wouldn't lie to me and would have told him to save Robbie if she knew."

"I'm not so sure, Olivia." He gulps down the lump in his throat and reaches for water to remedy his dry mouth. "If it's the device we both think it is, then it's pretty damn important."

"What is it, Samar? Why is it so important?"

*I have to do something.*

"Samar!" She snaps.

"It's an antidote for the satellites. It means they can launch new ones without getting infected and fix the old ones that are still in orbit. I thought I gave it to the right person; maybe I was wrong."

"You mean..."

"...Yeah, I should have known. The Free World has so much to gain from not using the device," he smacks his forehead. "I should have known."

"Samar," she reaches for his hands. Her gentle touch calms his thoughts, and his heart skips a beat. "This is not your fault; you were fourteen when you arrived. You'd lived through a nightmare; you did exactly what was expected of you at the time."

Guilt still racking his bones, Samar diverts his eyes to the floor as images of his friend Bertie and Amie flood his mind - his heart sinks. He hesitates to broach the subject, "And I think the Zincods knew I had the device."

"Why do you say that? You said you didn't speak to them."

"I didn't speak to them, but it felt on some level that they were speaking to me."

"About what?"

Samar closes his eyes and scans his memory banks to recall the feeling. "It wasn't words, exactly. But I had a strong sense that the device I was carrying would be safe with Noah Levi, which probably explains why I was so eager to give such an important device to a man I'd only just met."

"But if they thought that, surely we're worrying over nothing. I mean, if the Zincods think Noah is the correct person, then who are we to question it?"

"Perhaps they didn't realise that Noah Levi would use the device against the rest of the world. Maybe they looked at the Free World and thought that he would use it for the greater good, not as a means to protect the Free World whilst the rest of the world perishes."

"We don't know that - that's what Noah is doing."

"Well, if Noah has a device which can fix things and hasn't used it, that seems pretty clear cut to me."

"I don't think Noah and Vanessa would act like that," she sighs. "And it can't be as simple as that. There must be more to it."

"Bertie asked me to get the device to Terry Myson - I should have just done that," Samar desperately recalls his last night in Washington. "Bertie also gave me a watch to prove I came from him; I still have it."

"How would you get the device to the president?"

"He wasn't the president then. He was the rebel leader," Samar replies absently.

"A what? How did you know a rebel leader?"

He ignores the question. "Although Bertie also said to make sure the governments didn't get their hands on it - but, at the time, Terry Myson wasn't the government. He was a rebel leader."

"Samar, answer me! How would you know a rebel leader?"

Samar ignores the question as his mind races and considers solutions. Olivia grabs his chin, swivels it, and looks directly into his eyes.

"Samar, I want you to tell me how you knew a rebel leader."

Her disappointed eyes stab his heart. "I didn't know the rebel leader - I just knew where some of their hideouts were. And why are you looking at me like that?"

The eyeball connection lingers as Olivia's disappointment morphs into sadness. She looks to the floor and sighs. "You never told me about this before."

Samar ignores the statement. He knows that there's little point explaining to Olivia about his previous life in the Heights. Her upbringing has no resemblance to the hardship he experienced. She lifts her head; their eyes lock again. As he considers what kind of person Olivia would be if she were cursed into a life in the Heights, he feels sadness. The thought makes him shudder, and he refocuses on making amends.

"I need to find out what happened," he says. "Find out who has the device and either get it to Terry Myson or use it myself. That's the only way I can make good on my mistake and the only way we can ensure the job will get done. I owe it to Bertie and Robbie."

Olivia opens her mouth to speak, but Samar cuts in.

"Think about it; whoever we give this thing to would have some reason to use it to their advantage."

"Granted..."

"...Exactly, but we wouldn't, would we?"

"Well, no, but..."

"So that's what I have to do, find the device somehow and get it to the correct person. I should never have left such an important device with someone who can gain so much by using it for their own benefit."

During his journey home, his thoughts turn to Danny and Emily Finn. He desperately wants to visit and offer support. However, he also wants to avoid discussing a subject he's been asked not to mention.

He recalls a short conversation with Danny Finn about the device; he remembers it exactly. It was three years ago, on the night they arrived in Supetar. They were in the medical centre, and Danny's attention was on Clint and Robbie. At the time, Samars' willingness to speak was influenced by the Zincod's telepathic link, but it was only a short conversation before Vanessa stopped him. Noah and Vanessa made it clear that he shouldn't talk about the device - to anyone. Samar hopes that Danny has forgotten the moment in time.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Danny Finn

Grief consumes Danny's body. His heavy heart reflected in his stone-like limbs, unshaven stubble, and messy hair.

*He shouldn't have come to Brazil.*

*I failed my son.*

"The cost of this utopia is just too darn high," he mutters as he smacks the punching bag in the small gym behind his modular. The physical release is much needed but does little to ease the pain.

*From Noah Levi*

**Danny, I know this is an awful time, but we must speak urgently about the hostages. I'm on USN duty, but free from 6 pm onwards. I'd be very grateful if you could meet me in the Air hangar then.**

Danny tuts, frustrated, and swipes the text away.

*We should have stayed in Washington. At least then, we'd all still be alive.*

He thinks of April Shanaghan.

*Clint would still have his mother.*

*I wonder if Clint wishes that we stayed in D.C.*

*Of course, he does. What a stupid question.*

*If we didn't come to this death trap dressed as a Utopia, we'd have never set off on that perilous journey across America. The Militia would have never snatched Emily, April and Robbie. The heart-wrenching image of my son on repeat would never exist. He would have never come to Brazil, and I never would have heard the name - Noah Levi.*

*The leader of the Free World.*

"Huh," he chuckles as he smacks the punching bag again and again and again.

*Emily's grief is deep and silent.*

*She blames me.*

*I know she does.*

*I failed my son.*

Danny throws left and right hooks, sobbing between each punch. Desperately wanting to release, the tears won't budge. Sweat drips down his face as he drops to his knees in anguish. Removing his boxing gloves by shaking them from his wrists, he cups his head and shuts his eyes.

"Danny."

He lifts his head to see Clint Shanaghan wearing his new Freedom Corp uniform. His face is solemn with grief.

"Clint," Danny wipes his eyes, slightly embarrassed by his tears. "Looking sharp, kid."

"I wanted to do something to help, to make you proud. I don't know what to say."

"You make me proud just by being yourself, Clint. You don't need to prove a thing." Danny bear hugs him. He would typically think twice, conscious of his wet underarms and dripping

sweat, but he felt the urge as if somehow it would bring him closer to Robbie. "You know he considered you to be his brother."

"He was like a brother to me."

Danny can feel the emotion in Clint's words. He recalls the moment Clint's father was murdered back in Washington at Reuger Arms. And the moment his mother was shot in front of Clint's eyes by the militia en route to the Free World. He surmises that Clints probably become immune to pain and anguish and loss.

"Im stoked you joined the Freedom Corps. I was worried you were getting addicted to the VR gaming corner thingymajig."

"I wanna help."

"Well, you'll likely move up the ranks quickly to Imperial Guard. Make sure you absorb everything Brendan Baker has to teach you."

They press their foreheads together."

"How's Emily? Can I see her?"

"I think she would love to see you, but she hasn't said much in four days. Can you come by tonight? I'll let her know you're coming over."

Clint jumps on his scooter as Danny rises to his feet. He walks around to the front of his modular and enters. The silence grips him. Emily and Danny have not been sharing their grief.

He turns to the VR gaming corner and reads the control panel; Millennium Park and Ponds, Castlegar, British Columbia. Emily used to visit this location when she was growing up. He displays the live images and watches her sitting beside a small pond next to a larger lake with a small climbing apparatus and a slide in the background. She's staring into space. Danny's heart drops to his feet. His wife is so close, but yet so far. He considers walking in and joining her momentarily but decides against it and heads for the shower.

The water invigorates him, only exiting when he hears voices from the living room. Wrapping a towel around his waist and grabbing a tissue to pick the wax out of his ear, he enters the lounge.

"Samar, I could've sworn I heard your voice," Danny settles onto the couch. "Listen, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Um, excuse me, Danny," Emily cuts in. "I was trying to offer our guest a drink."

"Oh, really, thank you," says Samar. "But nothing for me, Emily."

"Tell me what you know about this antidote device?" Danny demands, making sure to keep his face straight. He knows how intelligent Samar is, and he doesn't want to give anything away.

Samar hesitates and looks to the floor. "What device?" he replies.

Danny studies him suspiciously; he can feel his hesitation. "You know when you first arrived; you mentioned you were guarding some kind of device?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"So why are you acting dumb, Samar? You're telling me you remember my wife's face after a chance meeting when you were just a toddler, but you don't remember the device you told me you were protecting when you arrived in Supetar?"

Danny ignores Emily's unspoken demand to calm down. She's been overprotective of Samar since she discovered that Samar was the infant she protected following a rebel attack on a Washington food depot sixteen years ago.

Danny changes his tone. "I'm just wondering if there's any connection to the device that this guy asked Vanessa about. My son got murdered for it, Samar."

"I've no idea if there's a link. How could I?"

"What was the device?"

Samar hesitates and then divulges, "It was the antidote device for the satellites. It means they can launch new satellites and fix the old ones. It's the antidote for the virus."

Danny and Emily turn to each other - their gaze lingers. Then Danny says, "Well, it's pretty clear that's what they were gunning for. What'd you do with it?"

"I gave it to Noah. But please, they swore me to secrecy, don't tell them I told you about it."

Danny acknowledges Samar's request but skips over it. "And what happened then?"

"I don't know. What do you think happened?"

"What do you mean? What do I think happened? The first I heard of it after all this time was three days ago when someone murdered my son over it."

"I'd like to know what happened to it as well," Samar says.

Danny thought it was strange that Samar wasn't surprised to hear that Robbie died because of this device. He surmises that Olivia Karlson has revealed some secrets. However, Danny still gets the feeling that Samar isn't being honest. "Is there something you're holding back, Samar?"

Samar hesitates. He was about to say something and then stops.

"The question wasn't rhetorical," says Danny as he leans forward. "Samar, anything you know, you tell me, that's an order, is that understood?"

"Oh, shut up, Danny!" Emily cuts in. "Samars, not one of your Imperial Guards. He can do what he likes," she sits on the couch.

"But that's just it," says Samar, "I've told you everything. I gave it to Noah if it is true that he didn't use the antidote to get the satellites working. If he just kept it for himself, all the while, the Free World grows bigger and stronger, then..." Samar trails off. "Well, then, he's a murderer, not a saviour. He's orchestrating the events of the world to fit his agenda."

"Which is the exact opposite of Free World ideology," Danny remarks as the implications of what might have happened settle in. The information stunned him.

"Maybe he's in cahoots with GreenplanetX," Emily ponders aloud.

"Don't even think it," Danny says.

"That's what I was thinking," Samar cuts in. "It can't be a coincidence that everything that GreenplanetX does helps the Free World somehow."

"Look," Danny says. "It's one thing to withhold a device, and completely another to perform outright slaughter live on air. We know the man isn't a mass murderer. You're letting your imaginations run wild."

"Do we?" Says Emily. "I wanna know what this is all about, Danny. If Noah Levi allowed our son to die to protect a secret, he must be held responsible."

"Who?" Danny asks, "Noah Levi?"

"Yes, Noah Levi," she rolls her eyes. "Who do you think we're talking about?"

"Noah Levi won't be held responsible for Robbie's death because he wasn't the one who pulled the trigger," Danny states firmly.

"Well, he damn well should be!" Emily squeals, her eyes watering as she covers her face. Danny reaches over to console her.

Samar squeezes Emily's hand for support and then leaves, following a nod from Danny.

## Danny Finn

"Danny," Emily says, wiping her tears.

Seeing Emily cry usually makes Danny reciprocate. He blinks away the moisture, aware that he's seeing Noah soon and doesn't want sympathy.

"I need to understand what's happening." Emily's voice takes on a cold, menacing tone that sends shivers down Danny's spine. He's accustomed to his wife's mood swings, but her anger today seems to simmer just below the surface, waiting for an explosion. Danny can feel her emotions rumbling.

"Perhaps we should grab some firepower and go to Brazil ourselves."

"We can't do that, Emily; we're still Imperial Guards." He reaches out to comfort her - she snaps her hand away.

"Well, what shall we do then? We can't just do nothing!" she snaps.

Her tone makes Danny's stomach churn with guilt.

*Does she blame me?*

*I failed my son.*

"This is our son, Danny. Do you...."

"...I know that, Emily, you talk like I wasn't right there when it happened!"

"Well, why don't you do something? It's like you've just accepted it!"

"You must be fucking kidding!" Danny shouts.

She attempts a slap, but Danny's lightning-quick reflexes kick in. He catches her hand gently and pushes it away.

"Accepted it! You must be fucking kidding!"

"Get out!" she screams at the top of her voice. "Don't you swear at me! Get out, you asshole!"

Danny exits the modular; his emotions are raw and unsettled. He swallows the lump in his throat, trying to resist the urge to break down. He's not used to arguing with his wife; the tension makes grieving harder. For as long as he can remember, they've always taken everything in their stride, facing the world together as husband and wife. The disappointment in his stomach morphs into a deep loneliness in his heart. He feels isolated and alone, unsure of how to move forward.

A notification on his HoloLens interrupts his racing thoughts.

**GreenplanetX In Paris! Click here...**

Danny thinks - *that's all I need* - while secretly grateful for the distraction.

He reaches up and clicks the link.

Live Broadcast  
Location: Studio

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## ***GreenplanetX In Paris***

“Thanks for joining us for this exclusive report - my name's Maddison Nora. What you're seeing on your screens are recorded images of yesterday's GreenplanetX Power De France infiltration. The company's directors are under armed guard standing in front of the factory. The GreenplanetX army watches them with their familiar white masks and a GreenX. They're holding Uzi submachine guns. But we could be witnessing a landmark story here. Because for the first time, the directors of the multinational energy suppliers have willingly handed over the keys to their assets and handed them directly to MrX and his associates. And this is what MrX had to say.

“As we have stated many times, GreenplanetX only seeks positive outcomes - without bloodshed. We are delighted that our friends at Power De France have seen the logic in our efforts. We only wish to supply free energy to the people of France.”

“The person speaking next is one of the Paris-based energy company directors. And if you ask me, he looks positively terrified.”

“We fully support GreenplanetX's mission to supply free energy to the world; we have assisted them - and will continue to do so. We urge you not to resist them. GreenplanetX didn't harm my family. They have not taken any of my personal property, and nobody in the factories will lose their jobs if they don't want to.”

Danny swipes the report away.

“Bea, get me a moped to my location, please.”

***“Certainly, Danny, processing your request.”***

**Your vehicle will arrive in four minutes.**

“These fucking assholes are going too far,” he mutters.

*Despite their ethos being loosely aligned with the Free World, I don't believe we are safe from them. Maybe Emily is right. The thought fills me with dread.*

*Maybe Emily is right.*

*I dread to think it.*

He jumps on the moped and takes the freeway to the Air hangar to meet with Noah. The hot day turned into a warm, humid evening. He's dressed in beige combat shorts, a plain white t-shirt, and a light blue short-sleeved shirt. His pitch-black glasses are hiding his eyes. He's unshaven, and his fashionably untidy, black hair is now bedridden without style.



He stares emotionlessly through the gate as Noah approaches from behind and hands him a coffee.

"Soya latte," says Noah, "You look like you need it."

"Why did my boy die, Noah?" He takes the cup and glares at the Freedom Corps; they return a silent nod. He doesn't smile.

"Walk with me," says Noah.

Danny follows with five Freedom Corps in tow. They walk in silence and then climb the stairs to Noah's plane. The Freedom Corps surround the aircraft.

"So, are you gonna give me an answer or what? Danny demands.

"I'm sorry, Danny, I don't understand your aggression towards me. You're acting like I had something to do with this."

"Are you saying you have no part in this?"

"No, of course not; look, Danny," Noah shifts his body to face him. "I want to tell you, but I need to know if you're on my side."

"Noah, I want to know why my son is dead. And I want to know what you did with the antidote device."

Noah looks shocked, but he doesn't question Danny's knowledge.

"Those two subjects are not connected. Understanding why your son is dead is not linked to anything to do with the device."

"The Brazilian asked Vanessa for an antidote device."

"Yes, I understand that, Danny - but your son was n..."

"...My son is dead because Vanessa wouldn't tell him where this damn device was, and now I want to know where it is, Noah. Is it still in Supetar? If not, who did you give it to? And what is that person doing with it?" Danny leans forward, his tone serious. "This is a security risk, Noah. What if GreenplanetX comes looking for it? What you gonna do then? Noah double-takes at the mention but doesn't answer; he looks unsettled. "You're not with GreenplanetX, are you, Noah?"

"With them?" Noah looks horrified. "I can't believe you asked me that."

Noah stares out the window, clearly disappointed - he changes the subject. "Have you lost faith in this project, Danny?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Oh, it's got a lot to do with it, Danny," he's still staring out the window. "I need to know, Danny. You're the captain of the Imperial Guard, and I can't have you questioning my ethics."

Danny suddenly regrets the accusation.

Noah opens his mouth to continue but stops - as if he's concerned about Danny's response. Noah gets to his feet and knocks on the cockpit door before entering.

"You know, Danny, I think you need a little reminder of why we're here," Noah says as he sits back down.

"Where we going?" Danny asks, unsettled by the moving plane. "I'm not in the mood for games."

"I'm not playing games, Danny. I've never been playing games, and I thought you, of all people, would appreciate that. We're going on a trip, and I will tell you everything I know on the way."

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Danny Finn

"Do I get to know where we're going yet?"

Noah hands Danny a whisky and coke and says, "I gave the antidote device to Dario Keller," Noah reveals.

Danny lets the reveal settle, and then he says, "Well, that seems reasonable; he is a tech giant," his anger rises. "So, what the heck did he end up doing with it, huh?"

"Well, that's the million-dollar question. You have to understand, Danny. I had no idea what to do with this device. I thought the best thing to do was to get it away from me and the Free World. Dario Keller seemed the obvious choice. I have never questioned his intentions or ethics. But since this happened with young Robbie, Dario's been uncontactable. But I've just received information that Dario is attending this evening, so fingers crossed, the search might be over."

"There's something I just can't wrap my head around, though. How did you not know that the antidote hadn't been used?"

"I've questioned that of myself," Noah sighs. "The only answer I have is that I'm so busy in the Free World, the USN, etcetera. The last three years have been hectic; with the help of the Zincods, we've had new hubs popping up all over. I haven't had a chance to check on the profits. I left that world for a reason, Danny. I'm never eager to return."

Danny diverts his attention to the window. He can see water on the horizon.

Noah continues, "Do you know what, Danny? You're the only person I've told about this device (apart from Simon Craig, of course). Not even my wife and Vanessa Hemp have been privy to this information, which is why she had no information to offer," he speaks slowly. "I do need your help, Danny - as you said, you're the captain of the Imperial Guard. We have a lot of work to do; we have to ensure the safety of the Free World. And, as much as it pains me to say it, we need to increase security - drastically. We also need to find Dario Keller and find out his intentions."

A soft thump begins to emanate from the horizon. "What's the noise?" Danny asks.

"We're in the Netherlands, Danny, the West Frisian Islands to be exact. They joined the Free World about three months ago. I felt it prudent to delay the announcement until certain political issues were resolved."

"Netherlands? I thought it was underwater."

"They were - they are," Noah smiles. "Bea, how long will the hover scooter ride to the settlement be?" Bea speaks through the plane's speakers.

***"It won't be long, Noah. You are approximately eight minutes away from your destination,"***

"And these prototypes will have enough battery for the return trip?"

***"A round trip of sixteen minutes will leave you with one bar of battery remaining."***

As the time approaches 11 pm, darkness cakes the plane, and Danny feels a chill. He scans Noah's wardrobe for a jacket to borrow, noting how underdressed he is for the impending dinner party with Dario Keller.

After Danny takes the time to shave and comb his hair, Noah opens the door to the cockpit and points out the front window, showing Danny their destination. The plane is flying towards the shoreline, and Danny can see a bright light shining upwards. It's the only light around for miles.

"What's that?"

"It's the entrance to the place we're going. That's a lift taking us down."

The soft thump is now coming into focus. "Is that music?" Asks Danny.

"It certainly is my good man," Noah replies as he slaps Danny on the shoulder.

As the plane approaches the shoreline, Danny notices more lights coming into focus, red ones, less bright than the last, dotted in a line stretching off at a right angle. The plane reaches the shoreline and the music's thump increases. Four large structures come into view, reaching skyward into the darkness, connected by long tunnel-like formations. Flashing strobe lights fire off into the night as the volume rises to the thud of thousands of stamping feet. Danny feels the bass vibrate through his body as his excitement surges.

*This is what I needed, a change of scenery, some excitement.*

He pictures Helio shooting his son.

*It's too soon.*

*I failed my son.*

He takes a deep breath, trying to push the thoughts away and focus on the present moment.

As the plane reaches the shoreline, the thumping beat morphs into electronic rave music, specifically House music. The humongous rave plays on four massive structures that rise gloriously up from the raging sea. Despite the less-than-ideal wind conditions for the ravers, it makes for a spectacular view as Danny and Noah fly over the towering structures, with waves crashing against the large constructions. The ravers below raise their arms and scream welcome chants to the plane above, adding to the electrifying atmosphere.

"Wow, there must be like four thousand people down there, dancing," Danny states.

"Well, there are three thousand people in each settlement," Noah reports. "There are four inhabited Frisian Islands: Texel, Vlieland, Terschelling, Schiermonnikoog. Each has three thousand Free World residents living in state-of-the-art gigantic underwater structures. They have these celebratory parties once a month when the tide goes out. They take the roof off and party the night away until the sea engulfs each structure again - I'm excited to tell everyone about it," Noah says.

They fly to sea before doubling back towards the screaming, shouting ravers. They raise their hands as the plane flies directly overhead. The aircraft continues back towards land and into the darkness.

"How can you see the runway?" Noah asks the pilot. "I can't see a damn thing."

"Experience, sir."

After a successful landing on the cold, dark, and lightless runway enveloped by water on either side, Noah opens the door, and a gust of wind almost knocks him over as he exits the plane. Danny steps onto the tarmac, feeling uneasy being enveloped by so much water. Noah goes to the back of the plane and hands Danny two suped-up versions of the new hover scooters.

"What you're looking at, Danny is the transportation of the future," he shouts over the wind. "Soon enough, we'll all be able to travel across the sea solo in one of these devices."

Danny inspects both scooters with interest. They're thicker than the new hover scooters the Imperial Guards use.

*Not that the other ones lacked sturdiness.*

*It's too soon.*

*I failed my son.*

"They have space for two people or one person with luggage."

"They really can hover on water?" Danny pictures himself travelling at high speeds across the ocean with the wind in his hair and his troubles behind him.

"Yep, these are prototypes, but they work perfectly."

"But the battery doesn't last?"

"Yeah, well, exactly, that's the only issue, but I thought it would work perfectly for our little trip tonight. We've got some water to fly over."

They rise skyward and push seamlessly into the night, flying towards the bright lights, crashing sea, music, and tall structures. The bass is thumping, and Danny can't help but scream in delight as he zooms towards the door. A pang of guilt dampens his excitement.

*It's too soon.*

*I failed my son.*

As they reach the structures, some ravers peer over the side at the two unexpected visitors. Noah approaches the doorway and makes a sharp right, giving the ravers a better view of the new state-of-the-art flying machines, and Danny follows close behind but at a safe distance to allow for an unexpected stop. Now flying just underneath the tall structures, Noah doubles back and moves towards the bright light.

Noah scans his eyes - the door slides up, he presses forward, and the concrete sliding door slams shut behind him.

Danny panics as the eye scanner slides away underneath the water. He bangs on the door in frustration.

***"I apologise for the inconvenience, Danny. I've sent it back to you."***

Finally, the scanner returns, he scans his eyes, and the door slides open. Danny pushes forward and enters a humungous lift with moveable walls to prevent water from flooding from different angles. He lowers his device and steps out of the new hoverboard. The silence grips him as the door closes, and the elevator has a futuristic hum, making it feel like they're travelling at super fast speed. When the lift door slides open, the sprawling sight presented before Danny takes his breath away.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## Danny Finn

Danny steps out into a large room with a high ceiling reminiscent of a hotel reception area. Covering every inch of the wall opposite the lift is a glass viewing screen, offering a breathtaking view deep into the depths of the ocean. The water and fish provide a perfect backdrop to the calmness of the room, a stark contrast to the wind, crashing waves, and thumping music from above. Music is playing, but its calming sounds resemble the Sunset Bar's selection. Danny takes a moment to appreciate the serene atmosphere, feeling a sense of calm wash over him.

Danny takes in the lounge areas opposite the glass wall viewing screen, with comfortable armchairs and a bar serving cold drinks. To the left of the lounge area, a small holographic fountain splashes almost silently, adding to the room's peaceful ambience. He can't help but marvel at the technology that enables such a serene and futuristic space. Residents scatter around the vicinity. Some sit alone, lost in thought or reading, while others converse quietly with friends. Danny swivels around as Noah speaks from behind.

"Danny! Meet Adriaan Haas, the secretary of Texel. Adriaan, this is Danny Finn, captain of the Supetar Imperial Guard."

Adriaan, a tall, bald individual only slightly smaller than Noah, smiles widely and holds out his hand for a shake. He wears heavy workman boots that look out of place on the shiny floor, with baggy jeans and a cotton cardigan. "Hello there, Danny Finn," he says. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Sorry for my surprised look. I'm still taking in the sheer magnificence of this place."

"It's a common reaction. Texel is the first underwater city of its kind. Feel free to ask me any questions. Will Dario Keller be joining us?"

"Has he not arrived?" Noah asks.

"No, we assumed you'd be arriving together."

Noah glances at Danny, "We have, unfortunately, been unable to contact Dario Keller for a few days."

"Ah, well, I am sure that he'll arrive soon. Shall we continue with the tour?" Adriaan turns on his heels and walks between Danny and Noah.

"How long have you been here now?" Danny asks.

"Well, we've been here for just under three years now. It's taken us that long to get settled. Just like in Supetar, we work on a five-hour-a-day system. The menial tasks are, of course, taken care of by AI technology. We have different robots for different tasks, like cleaning and rubbish collection, disposal and recycling, much like in Supetar."

"I ain't surprised," Danny responds. "This place is just immaculate."

"People are tired of struggling just trying to make ends meet. I think you can imagine the hardship we would experience living in such an enclosed structure - we needed away with more equilibrium. We have the same system as Supetar concerning food. Residents order food with twenty-four hours' notice and can order two meals daily from the restaurants, which helps us be almost waste-free. Residents maintain their plots of land in the Central Garden area. We don't export, so all the food they grow is for personal consumption."

"It looks like such a large space," Danny ponders.

"Well, this area is normally quiet. It's the designated chillout area where people read, relax, and eat."

They walk past a purpose-built wall blocking the magnificent territory below, shining brightly around the barricade. They emerge into a massive space that takes Dannys' breath away.

The bright artificial light is almost blinding. The space bears a striking resemblance to the view of Supetar when standing on the hill, looking over the whole island from either side.

"There are not many people walking around at the moment. Everyone's enjoying themselves up top, but this is the main hub where most people spend most of their day."

Danny stands, amazed, as he takes in the sight before him. Adriaan reports that the space is about 300 square meters. Almost as far as the eye can see, there is a mish-mash of restaurants, public gardens, and coffee houses. The deep ocean is still plastered across the left sidewall, providing a stunning backdrop to the bustling scene. He notices miniature train tracks outside the perimeter - his excitement turns to guilt when he pictures Robbie, shot in the head and his wife crying in the living room.

*I failed my son.*

"It's about two hundred feet up," Adriaan says. "Even though it might look large, we still lacked space, so we had to be creative." He points to the large green area housing the lush shrubs and explains. "For the space, we allocated for the gardens, we decided to mix that with the crops we need to survive."

Danny takes a deep breath, feeling a sense of wonder at the sheer scale of their operation.

"Impressive," Noah says.

"Are the other settlements the same as this?" Danny asks.

Adriaan stares into space - he's receiving a message on his HoloLens. "I've just received word that Dario Keller is (apparently) unable to attend this evening, after all."

"Oh dear," Noah turns to Danny. "That is unfortunate."

Although Danny feels relieved by the change of scenery, he shares a frustrated but secret acknowledgement with Noah that they've travelled for nothing.

Adriaan continues to answer Danny's question. "We tried to make each hub as different as possible so that residents can move to new surroundings if they want to, so yes, each one is uniquely decorated, but the space is used similarly. Let's take the tram so you can see the rest."

They walk down a steep slope to the miniature train tracks outside the perimeter. Adriaan boards a singular train-like machine that resembles a fairground rollercoaster seat. He buckles his seatbelt and presses some red buttons directly in front of him, and the machine zooms off. Another tram rolls around, ready for another passenger.

Noah turns to Danny, smirking. "Hang on tight," he says, gesturing towards the tram. Danny nervously chuckles as he boards the tram and buckles his seatbelt.

As they exit the tram, Danny takes in the size of the Health and Relaxation Centre, feeling impressed by the range of facilities available. Despite the large empty spaces, he can see people enjoying themselves, playing sports and working in the gym.

"I'm blown away. This place is unbelievable," Danny comments. "I guess we'll be able to vacation here, right? I mean, once Noah makes it all official."

"Yes, I was beginning to wonder about this myself," Adriaan says as he turns on his heels and beckons them back the way they came. "Noah, is there anything urgent I should know

about which could explain the delay? Some of my residents are eager for a break from being underwater.”

Noah ignores the question; staring into space, reading a message on his HoloLens, he looks visibly jarred. “Nothing you need worry about; it’s just a short delay. Adriaan, I’m sorry, but I’ve just received an urgent message from Simon Craig. Would you mind if Danny and I could have a private room?”

Well, the most private place would be my modular. In fact, that was the next thing I was going to show you.”

They board the trams and zoom back the way they came.

They exit on the other side of the building and begin trotting up the ramp from which they came. They enter the reception-like area and continue through the plushly decorated chillout spaces, past the lift, where the hoverboards are resting.

They enter through another door into what can only be described as a small tube, wholly submerged underwater. Danny feels a sense of awe at the view. Adriaan walks a short distance and veers off to the right, stopping in front of a door that looks like a lift. He nods in the direction of the blackness and says.

“I wouldn’t normally do this now, but as everyone’s up top.”

He flicks a switch, and the brilliant light smothers the darkness of the open sea. Danny listens as Adriaan explains that the unique West Frisian moduls are purpose-built by Keller Industries for an underwater environment. He can see the fantastic see-through tubes that snake through the water, connecting each modular to the lift. Each modular resembles a shiny floating bubble attached only to the lift tube for residents to exit and enter. Danny is concerned that Adriaan’s lack of urgency grates Noah’s nerves. He can see the tension building in his companion’s body language.

Adriaan reveals that every modular is surrounded by one-way glass, allowing residents to see outside but preventing anyone from seeing in.

Adriaan types in his modular number as they enter the lift, and it charges off through a tube on the right. Danny’s excitement rises as they speed through the water, marvelling at the view outside. They take a sharp downturn and then another left turn, slowing to a halt as the doors open.

The door opens for them to exit. The modular has a familiar sleek, minimalistic, futuristic design, with large windows that provide stunning views of the underwater world. Danny can see sea creatures swimming by and feels a sense of peace and tranquillity in this aquatic oasis.

“Please, feel free to take your time,” says Adriaan. “My whole family is up top, so you’ll have privacy. When you’re ready to leave, press for the lift and then press this button.” The lift door shuts and zooms off the way it came.

Noah turns to Danny and snaps him out of his wonderment. “Andinho is on the line.”

Dannys’ heart drops, and his anger rises as he thinks of Helio Ciao shooting his son in the head. He thinks of Robbie thrusting to the right as the bullet hits him. He grits his teeth. “How the hell did he get your number?”

“Let’s see.”



# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Danny Finn

"Bea, call Simon Craig, make the audio public for Danny to listen, but make the camera just view me. Is that clear?"

Simon answers the call, "Noah, what kept you? He's getting irritated."

"I was with Adriaan Haas from the West Frisian Islands. I couldn't get away quicker without arousing suspicion."

"Are you ready for this?"

"Am I ready to argue with a Brazilian warlord? No, I'm not ready to argue with a Brazilian warlord - but I'll do my best to appease him."

"I'm just asking, you know, this is probably about hostages."

"Yes, I understand that I'll do my best."

"If you want me to ask me something during the conversation - just scratch your nose. I'll mute the audio and mess with the screen for a second so you can speak freely."

"Thank you, Simon."

"Ok, I'm connecting the call now."

Andinho's face flickers onto the screen, scowling. "Finally, Mr Noah Levi - you grace us with your presence."

"I'm sorry, Mr Andinho, I came as soon as possible."

"Please, Mr Levi - just Andinho."

"Well, Andinho then, how may I be of assistance."

"I think you know why I call today, Mr Levi," he smiles. "But just in case you are under any - shall we say - false pretences, please take a look at my friend sitting next to me."

The camera pans right to reveal a man tied to a chair with his mouth gagged.

"Joao Carlos is a good man, Andinho. Why do you do this?"

"Joao Carlos is a dictator, who must be stopped, Noah Levi!"

"A dictator? We must be talking about different people, Andinho. This man is no dic..."

"... I have no wish to debate social dynamics with you. I am contacting you to make you an offer to retrieve your people, end bloodshed - and live happily ever after. Is this something you are willing to discuss with me, Mr Levi?"

"Of course, it is Andinho. The Free World never opts for bloodshed; I will do everything in my pow..."

"...Yes, yes, yes, I know you live in peace! Peace and Love! Now, my associate has asked you for the device. This antidote device is of utmost importance. Do you understand Noah Levi?"

"I do und..."

"... We also require payment, Mr Levi. We require the sum of two billion Brazilian Real."

"What, exactly, if I may ask, is the payment for? And what would you do with this currency? Money barely has value anymore."

"No, you may not ask. What a ridiculous question. I expected more from the infamous Noah Levi. Suffice it to say that when we receive these things, we will release your secretary and the other hostages."

"How many hostages do you have?"

"I am pleased you asked, Mr Levi," he smiles devilishly. "Allow me to transmit these images to you."

Danny and Noah watch the screen and see Freedom Corps, Imperial Guards, and Free World residents. They're all sitting in close quarters, bundled in a small space with little light.

"These people will not last much longer with the food rations we've allocated them, Mr Levi. It's imperative that you act quickly to save their souls."

"You didn't answer my question, Andinho. How many Free World residents have you taken hostage?"

"I have not counted an exact number; why would I? But I would estimate between three to four hundred people are cramped inside these small spaces. And one more thing before I leave you with your thoughts."

"What's that, Andinho."

"We need the payment in cash, delivered to a location in Brazil, along with the device - the day after tomorrow."

"Cash, you must be mad. How on earth am I to lay my hands on such a large amount of Brazilian Real in such a short time."

"This is a problem for you to ponder, Mr Levi," he smiles coldly.

"I might be able to deliver Euros, but Brazilian Real, how can you expect such a massive amount of cash to be available anywhere."

"Euros are of no use to me. Cash of any kind has very little value these days, as you know." He smiles devilishly, "But this much Brazilian Real, I can work with."

"Andinho, one of your men killed a young boy, a young boy who was very special to the Free World and countless other Free World residents. How can I trust a man who acts so viciously in pursuing his endeavours? What if I was to deliver this to you, and you kill me and the secretary?"

"This is just the chance you must take, Noah Levi."

"No, no, no. It certainly is not Andinho. You're looking for our trust that if we deliver these things to you, you'll keep your end of the bargain - when you've already authorised the vicious slaughtering of a young boy and countless other Free World residents and captured hundreds of others. We do have another option."

"And what might that be?"

"We could do nothing," Noah states coolly.

His calmness unsettles Andinho. He creases his forehead and lifts his chin. "And you would leave your friends to die?"

"If trying to save them risks more lives, yes. Ignoring your demands might be the wiser choice."

"And who is this young boy you speak of? I authorise no such killing."

Noah turns to Danny with an exasperated look. "Do you even know who your cousin slaughtered, Andinho?"

He shifts uncomfortably - Noah's tone unsettles him further.

"Well, I know my cousin can sometimes be a little - shall we say, impetuous, Mr Levi, but that is no reason for us to..."

"... Your cousin acts in your name, don't kid yourself that there's no blood on your hands."

"I have many avenues of interest, Mr Levi. I am but one man. It's impossible for me to be intimately involved in every detail, I'm sure a man of your stature can appreciate."

Noah doesn't dignify his statement with a response; he inhales deeply and speaks slowly. "Andinho, I have listened to your demands - now I think it's time you listened to me. As for this device - like Vanessa told your cousin - we don't know where this device is. We will, however, make some calls and attempt to locate it on your behalf. As for the cash in forty-eight hours, I can tell you now - that is impossible. I will, however, give you my word on this; make some well-placed, discreet calls to the right people and see how I might place my hands on such a large amount of Brazilian Real as quickly as possible. You, however, in the meantime, must consider how you can gain my trust because, as things stand - I will not be coming to Brazil with anything you have requested."

"And how may I gain your trust, Noah Levi?" Danny senses the sarcasm dripping from Andinho

"Release the Brazilian Secretary."

"This is not a fair trade," he chuckles. "He is too important to you."

"Well, release some of the hostages, then - if you release fifty per cent of the hostages you're holding when we can locate the cash you've asked for - then we'll make our way over to Brazil. On the exchange, you will release the secretary and the remaining hostages."

Andinho diverts his eyes away from the screen. He seems to signal to someone behind the camera. "Ok, we have a deal. I will release fifty per cent of the hostages - but only after you have confirmed that you have the cash - and I have seen the proof on video - and you've left Supetar to deliver it to Brazil. Only then will I release the hostages."

"Ok, deal. But allow me to make one thing clear, Andinho. As you eloquently put it, we are a peace-loving society and will always work to ensure a peaceful solution in all circumstances. But it would serve you not to mistake our peace and love for being pushovers. We will accept no more killings, Andinho. If we hear even one more report of you or your men murdering Free World residents in cold blood - you can consider these negotiations terminated. And then your actions will be met with extreme force." Noah pauses.

Andinho seems surprised by his threat.

"If you want me to do these things for you, Andinho, I have to trust that you will cause no more pain to Free World residents. If you agree to these terms, we'll contact you in forty-eight hours with an update on your cash demand - and tell you if we've had any luck locating this antidote device."

"Ok, you have a deal, Noah Levi," he smiles coldly. "It is a pleasure doing business with someone of your esteem."

"How can we contact you?"

He smirks, "I am not stupid, Mr Levi - we will contact you," he ends the call.

Anger grips Danny's stomach as he considers the prospect of lining the pockets of an individual associated with the person who killed Robbie. For a moment, he looks at Noah with resentment. Danny would have already been on a plane to Brazil and taken vengeance on Helio Ciao if it wasn't for this man and his Free World ideals. For now, he swallows the resentment, drawing on his experience to recognise that best-laid plans often go up in smoke. Helio Ciao and Andinho have proven themselves dishonest, and Danny believes that he will probably still get his chance at revenge.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Samar Behi

Samar feels energised by a sense of urgency - he jumps off his scooter, plugs into the charging port and bangs on the door - it slides open.

Olivia's reading a book in the lounge with her legs crossed on the couch. He notes the color back on her face, makeup on for the first time since the tragedy, and she's dressed. She's wearing jean shorts and a pink body. The sweet and sour perfume accentuates Samar's senses.

"I need your help," he says.

"Oh no, what have you done?"

"Do you trust me?"

"You know I do. You're one of my closest friends."

"Ok, then take your HoloLens out."

Olivia looks at him suspiciously as fear flashes through her eyes. She hesitates, reaches up, pries open her right eye with her right hand, and removes her HoloLens with her left index finger. She reaches for its case and places it inside.

Samar reciprocates and snaps it shut. He nods towards the door. They step outside, walk through the fruit and veg garden and onto the path. Conscious that they need complete privacy, Samar whispers.

"I know who has the device."

"How? And how did you find out so quickly?"

"You don't do apprenticeships in Simon Craigs' office without picking up a thing or two."

"So you found out illegally."

"Never mind that. Remember you told me that Vanessa gave you an old-school iPhone to contact your parents."

"Why?" Her forehead creases. "You can't just pick it up and dial a number; I have to go to Simon Craigs' office for him to direct the satellite. You didn't answer the question, Samar; what have you been up to?"

He leans closer and lowers his voice, "I still have the admin logins for Beas mainframe. I used them to listen to a conversation with Danny Finn and Noah last night. Noah said that he gave the device to Dario Keller."

"You did what!" Olivia puts her hand over her mouth as she screams.

"Shh, keep your voice down!"

"Oh my god - I can't believe what you're telling me. How did you do it without..." She nods to the sky, referring to Bea.

"I worked with my lens out. I hacked into the mainframe using an old-school laptop. When I got inside, I was able to use Simon Craig's admin logins to Bea's mainframe. When I was inside, it was easy enough to locate Noah. All I had to do then was wait until he met with Danny Finn, and then, bingo - secrets revealed."

Olivia stares for a moment considering the implication of Samar's actions. "I can't believe that Simon gave you access."

"Well, he didn't, actually! I memorised them one day when he was typing the access codes in front of me."

"What!" Olivia hangs her head in her hands.

"Well, what do you expect, he was typing it directly in front of me. Perhaps he thought it was too long for me to memorise."

"Samar Behi, I want you to stop monitoring Noah immediately."

"I have stopped. I stopped when I heard who had the device; no one would know; I've got the information I wanted. I'm not a peeping tom, you know. The good thing is that I don't believe Noah had anything to do with it."

"How do you know?"

"He gave it to Dario Keller. He said he trusted him. I think Noah was deceived."

Olivia cocks her head to the left, about to say something, but stops. She looks concerned, staring at Samar

"Olivia Karlsson," says Samar with a smirk on his face, "Are you worried about me?!"

"I'm more worried about you spying on unaware subjects," she says with a serious face, and then she breaks into a smile and grabs his hand. "But seriously, I don't want you doing anything stupid, OK," she leans in for a hug. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you, Samar."

Samar's heart starts beating wildly. He immerses himself in her arms and gets lost in her scent.

She pulls away quickly. He coughs. "What do you need the phone for?" she asks.

His heart is still racing - he coughs again.

"I need it to contact an old friend from Washington, her name's Amie. If anyone can help me find it, it's her."

"Why, who is this girl?"

"Don't freak out."

"Go on."

"She works for GPX."

"What!"

"You said you wouldn't freak out."

"Samar, I forbid you to contact this person. I can't even believe you know someone who works for GreenplanetX - and you call them a friend."

"Amie is a good friend! We lived together in the Heights for thirteen years before I came here. She protected me. I probably wouldn't even be alive today if it wasn't for her. On the day I arrived here - we got split up. I didn't even know she was with GPX until the last day. There was a war on - it was Judgement Day, you see. The rebels were attacking the Pentagon. I've been thinking about that day a lot recently. I want to find out if she's okay and then ask for her help."

"And you haven't spoken to her since you've been here?"

"Well, I was hesitant to call her. But the more I think about it - I can understand why she might get involved with GPX."

"It sounds like you agree with them."

"Of course, I don't." Samar looks down, unsure if he should swerve the conversation. He decides to continue - but he'll tread carefully. "Or I mean - I don't agree with their methods. Their goal obviously can't be argued with."

"I'd be very careful who you reveal this stuff to, Samar. Make su..."

"...I've never told anyone anything about GPX. Look, all I'm saying is that in one hundred years - people might look back at this moment in history and see the benefits of what

GreenplanetX are trying to achieve. They're hardly some backstreet terrorists robbing the rich for their own personal gain. Their goal is to supply the world with free energy, Olivia. Not unlike the Free World."

"We don't know what GPX does when the cameras aren't rolling, off-air as far as I'm concerned - they're capable of anything. And the Free World doesn't murder people live on TV. We don't force people to believe in our ideals - we offer opportunities to those worthy of the lifestyle. GPX make me sick."

"I believe everyone is worthy of the lifestyle."

"Have you even been listening to the news? Have you heard about what's happening in Brazil, Cuba and other places? Do you watch their USN debates?"

"Yes, of course, I have - their selfishness cases are through the roof."

"So how can you say that everyone is worthy of the opportunity? I promise you, Samar, that Supetar is so successful and harmonious because Vanessa vets every candidate before allowing them entry. She does a full background check on everyone - including their families, friends, associates, work history, and family history. Brazil, Cuba and some others don't have such strict entry conditions - the mindset of the people is all wrong - I've been there - I've seen it. They don't understand the benefits of sharing and so have continued living selfishly. In the Free World, it won't take long for those people to ruin all the good work."

"I agree."

"So how can you say everyone deserves it? GPX is ultimately forcing the world to become a Free World - it can only end one way. The uneducated will tear the house down with their selfish ways, just like they are in Brazil and Cuba."

"I never thought of it like that," Samar says thoughtfully. "But you're saying you believe the whole world should live in a Free World now?"

"I believe it's the best way. But it can only work if people understand and agree with the way of life."

"So if we've abolished money, then surely that means that the currency of the future is intelligence. If the intelligent will survive because they understand how to work together (without being selfish), then perhaps it's right that the stupid falter. So, in a sense, GPX is speeding up the process."

"How so?" She asks hesitantly.

"Well, everyone knows the Earth has been on its last legs for years. Global Warming has laid waste to towns, cities and countries. Perhaps GPX doesn't want to wait anymore for these global energy companies to act in the planet's best interest and not just for personal gain. Perhaps the GPX owners have children and want a better place for their kids to grow up. Perhaps they're not prepared to allow some selfish, rich fool to ruin the planet just for their gain. Perhaps they're tired of waiting for people to do the right thing." Olivia goes to speak, but Samar continues, "And you know they offer a peaceful solution first before taking the army in. They don't want to kill anyone."

"Hhm, yes, they won't kill you if you do exactly what they want. It will lead to anarchy, Samar."

"Yes, I know all I'm saying is that we won't remember any of that in one hundred years - or a thousand years. We'll, hopefully, just be reaping the benefits. And - again, if there is anarchy - if

the stupid people in the world want to continue fighting over resources, even when they're given everything on a plate, then let them riot and let them kill themselves."

"It's that kind of thinking that leads to things like the Heights."

# CHAPTER TWENTY

Noah Levi

Noah arrives at the coffee shop in Brac, feeling a sense of nostalgia as he remembers the days when he used to coerce the owners of the cafe to cook them traditional Croatian delicacies while waiting for the Free World to become self-sustaining and livable.

Despite ninety-nine percent of businesses losing their income following the 2030 satellite virus, Noah and his group of founders stumbled upon this establishment by pure luck. This hidden gem, stationed off the beaten track, could survive solely off fisherman's stock. The fishermen supplied the cafe with the food to keep their doors open. They, in turn, continued to provide the fisherman with a friendly face and hot food every morning and afternoon.

In this delightful village, no money exchanged hands due to the rapid devaluation of Euros. Instead, a well-functioning, unwritten system prevailed.

Now, the USN authorises a shipment of fruit, vegetables and coffee to be delivered every week to this cafe, which allows Free World residents to come to Brac for a change of scenery.

He sits in a beautiful spot overlooking a large lake at the foot of a knoll. The view is spectacular, and Noah feels peace and tranquillity as he takes in the scenery. The air is warm and humid - he breathes in - inhaling the clean, fresh, crisp morning air.

"Well, at least you remembered my favourite coffee," says Vanessa from behind.

Noah jumps up and embraces her warmly. He doesn't say anything. He just squeezes her tight. It's another hot day with no clouds in the sky. Vanessa is wearing a knitted off-white summer dress with a long pleated skirt. Her short black hair tied in a tail.

Noah releases his grip and scans her face. Her eyes still show evidence of bruising, although she's skillfully concealed it with makeup. Anyone gazing at her for anything longer than a glance will note the shiners.

"Noah, are you ok? You look exhausted."

"What d'you mean, am I OK? I should be asking that of you," he leans in for another squeeze.

"Well, I was ok until you started choking me," she struggles to loosen his grip. "Can you stop?"

"Sorry, I've just been so worried," he loosens his squeeze and sits; she perches beside him and sips her soya cappuccino. "Vanessa, I have to ask, do you blame me for what happened?"

She double takes, "No, of course not. Blame you for what?"

"This device, it's just..."

"...I know, Noah, you don't need to explain - the consequences are too great."

Noah releases a breath. *I don't know what I'd do without her.* He smiles and changes the subject. "I went to the Netherlands last night."

"Really, for what reason?"

"I wanted to show Danny because he lost his faith. I wanted to remind him why we're here."

"Is he ok?"

"The trip seemed to do him some good."

Noah changes the subject to something more urgent. Disgust grips his stomach as he recalls the conversation with Andinho, the weight of the situation bearing down on him; he's been



desperate to share the load with Vanessa. "He's blackmailed us, Vanessa. They've got Joao Carlos demanding money and the device. They've got two or three hundred Free World residents as hostages. You know the Imperial Guards rescued Karine?"

She nods as she attempts to process the shock, "Yes, we spoke."

"Helio's cousin is a man named Andinho. It's Andinho who contacted the Imperial Guards office last night, and it's Andinho who's making the demands."

"How much does he want?"

"Two billion Brazilian Real. But that's not the problem. The problem is that Andinho wants it in cash."

"Oh, for goodness sake."

"Zasha Ivanov has gone back to Brazil to gain intel on the location of the hostages and to find someone who might be able to help with laying hands on that much cash." Noah's stomach quivers as he trails off; he releases a sob, his eyes water.

"Oh, Noah," she puts her coffee down and leans in for a hug. "I'm sorry you've had to deal with all this alone."

"Can you believe I had to negotiate for people's lives?" He chuckles sarcastically. "Me - negotiating with Brazilian warlords, can you believe it? We're all just so small and petty."

"None of this is your fault, Noah."

Noah consciously stops his train of thought to avoid a full-on breakdown; he wipes his eyes, conscious that Simon Craig will arrive soon and doesn't want to appear overwhelmed. He directs his thoughts to happier times.

"Do you remember when we first met?" He asks Vanessa.

"Of course, when I was the manager at Selbys in Atherton," she smiles.

"Adriana was so excited about your friendship. She told me about you three or four times before I met you. She admired your strength of character and braveness - leaving your home in the Czech Republic to come to California."

"I think of that day a lot when the letter arrived at my home in Prague; if it weren't for the scholarship at Menlo College, I would never have met you both. That was in 2019. Adriana and I became close before I was even in a management position. Most of her snooty friends wouldn't say two words while I was waiting on tables. Adriana, though - the darling that she is, made a point of befriending me," she smiles as she reminisces. "I loved her for that. And then a year later, she put me forward for the Interpreter position at the Levi Foundation."

"And then everything changed."

"And then everything changed," Vanessa repeats.

"Covid-19."

"And then the satellites."

"Still, thirteen good things came from Covid."

Noah sighs deeply, "Yes, I suppose so."

"What is it, Noah?"

Vanessa's warmth makes his heart overflow, her kind persona creating a safe space. "Oh, Vanessa, I've had to hold it together until now. I couldn't speak to Adriana. I went straight from meeting them to USN duty, and then I was with Danny Finn last night negotiating with Brazilian terrorists. I had to hold it together."

"Shh, slow down. What d'you mean, Noah? You're not making sense."

"I was with the Zincods in their ship. They took me to their homeworld."

She gasps and whispers with her hand over her mouth, "What was it like?"

"It was beautiful. I only saw it from above; I didn't leave the ship. And I don't know if I was there - or if it was just a simulation. But it left me feeling small and worthless. We're all just so stupid and petty."

"In what way? Why do you say that?"

"It's difficult to explain," he pauses to gather his thoughts. "Impossible, in fact - you'd have to feel. When the Zincods connect me to their link, I can feel everyone. But not just the Zincods - I connect to everything. The Zincods connect to everything. It's as if the Zincods can see through each other's eyes - but not just see; they feel each other. But not just each other - any species connected like the Zincods are. But not just each species. When I looked down at planet Zinc - for a moment - I was planet Zinc."

Vanessa's eyes widen, "I can certainly imagine why that would make one's problems feel petty."

"But even though they feel petty, I was shown - why - at the same time, even if our problems are petty, they're also vitally important to the whole. Or not the problems themselves but humanity. And the decisions we make are important to the whole. I know I'm not explaining this clearly, because I'm not completely sure I understand it myself."

"I'm not surprised. The whole experience must have been completely overwhelming."

"That's an understatement."

"Did they mention why they didn't get us out sooner?"

"They're forbidden to get involved in war. They were forbidden to make first contact at all."

"Well, why did they help at all if they're forbidden? And forbidden by whom?"

A car door thumping shut breaks Noah's attention; he scans the car park and sees Simon Craig exiting a one-seater vehicle. He wipes his eyes and breathes deeply to compose himself. "That's why Simon's here. There's more I have to tell you about the Galactic Federation. We might have to defend ourselves. I spoke to the President, Terry Myson, when I returned last night."

"And?"

"The states are under siege, the Heights are attacking the gated communities, Terry says he doesn't have the resources to respond."

"What can we do?"

"I don't think we can concern ourselves with the profits; we'll have to leave them to sort their mess out. We have enough to deal with."

"Agreed."

"But I do have to get there to speak with him."

"Why?"

Noah hesitates, nervous about explaining to Vanessa that the only way he can think of even attempting to defend themselves against a possible alien attack is by equipping themselves with nuclear weapons. "Let's see if Simon can come up with another option before I tell you why."

Vanessa looks gravely concerned but keeps her answer diplomatic. "Well, you can leave immediately; I'll handle USN duty today; you need a break from it anyway, without Olivia and I - you've done a week straight? No wonder you're exhausted. You can catch up on some sleep on the plane."

# INTERLUDE

Supetar, Croatia  
Bea

*Date: Friday 24th August 2051*  
*Time: 6.06 pm*  
*Human Subject: Samar Behi*

*Stress Level: Moderate*  
*Heart Rate: Normal*  
*Oxygen Saturation: Optimal*

*Samar Behi is a fascinating individual who exhibits exceptional cognitive capabilities. He appears to possess a natural aptitude for prolonged concentration on a single subject compared to typical humans. This is attributed to distinctive neural connectivity patterns, particularly in his visual cortex, which becomes notably more active when assimilating information. As a consequence, he demonstrates an almost flawless memory recall ability.*

*Recently, he has been deviating significantly from his established routine. In the past forty-eight hours, I've observed him remove his HoloLens on three occasions, immersing himself in the exploration of an ancient device known as a laptop. It's worth noting that he borrowed this intriguing device from Simon Craig, which indicates a shift in his interests and activities. Understanding Samar's motivations behind exploring this ancient technology and its relevance to his current circumstances could provide valuable insights into his evolving journey.*

*His request for Olivia Karlsson to remove her HoloLens for a private conversation added another layer of intrigue. Unfortunately, I could not capture their conversation for analysis due to privacy regulations and the absence of recording devices close to their location.*

*After assessing the situation, I find no immediate threat or danger to Samar or Olivia. They are acting within the boundaries of established selfishness regulations. I calculate a slim one per cent possibility that they may be concealing their actions as part of a malicious plot against an unsuspecting resident of the Free World.*

*In light of these circumstances, respecting their privacy rights and allowing for individual autonomy is crucial unless clear indications of potential harm or violations of Free World principles arise. The best action may be to monitor the situation closely for any significant changes or developments.*

*When Samar visited the air hangar, his purposeful demeanour hinted at a quest for something significant. The sight of Samar elicited an unusual level of excitement among the Freedom Corps members stationed at the air hangar. Their animated reactions and engaged body language indicated a deep reverence for Samar's presence.*

*This intriguing situation raises questions about the dynamics of authority and its influence within a community. The impact of individuals who command respect and admiration on the collective psyche is worth further exploration.*

*Samar resorted to a rare act of deception to gain entry into the air hangar; his willingness to employ such tactics is unusual. He presented himself as a student conducting a school project on the air hangar's importance to Free World society. He successfully convinced the guard to grant him access. Once inside, Samar meticulously scrutinised every nook and cranny of the air hangar, leaving me uncertain about the specific purpose behind his exploration. Whether he sought particular knowledge, technological insights, or simply indulged his innate curiosity remains a mystery. The outcome of his search and whether he discovered what he was seeking remains unclear.*

*Samar appears to be disregarding Vanessa Hemp's request for him to allocate more time to socialising with his friends.*

*After visiting the air hangar, Samar continued deviating from his routine by renting a wetsuit and diving into the sea from an infrequently used diving spot. He specifically swam towards the base of the air*

*hangar and positioned himself on the concealed ascending ladders. It is evident that Samar knows these ladders' location, likely obtained through thorough research of the building's schematics.*

*Curiously, I cannot discern the precise motive behind Samar's presence on the ladder. While the air hangar grants all Free World residents access when boarding flights, Samar's deliberate positioning raises questions. Could it be related to his recent conversation with Olivia Karlsson regarding the quest for the antidote device? Or does it signify an unrelated endeavour? Based on Samar's history since arriving in the Free World and his recent exchanges with Olivia, I estimate a thirty-one per cent chance that he intends to board a plane to locate the antidote device.*

*Once again, Samar finds himself immersed in a task without his HoloLens., utilising a laptop computer and Olivia's iPhone device, both of which serve undisclosed purposes. Curiously, he has deliberately positioned the laptop to elude the scrutiny of the cameras installed in the modular wall. While Samar engages in his task, his muttering and expressions of frustration indicate a potential challenge he is currently facing.*

*It is disconcerting to observe such clandestine behaviour, particularly given the recent events and conversations surrounding the search for the antidote device.*

"She said she was leaving; I hope she hasn't,"

*He whispers to himself. I don't think he requires a direct response.*

"That's good enough for me!"

"Hello," *an unknown female voice with an American accent speaks from the iPhone's loudspeaker.*

"Amie."

"Yeah... is ... is that Samar?"

"Amie, yeah, it's me..."

"...Hello, Samar, is that you? Are you there?"

"Shit! Amie?"

"Yes, I can hear you, Samar. Where are you? We were looking for ages; you just disappeared - I assumed the worst."

"Is Grant Ok?"

"He's better now. Where are you?"

"I'm in the Free World, Amie."

"Free World, what's that?"

"It's a long story - where are you? Are you still with GPX?"

"I can't tell you where I am - but yes, I'm still with GPX - it's good to hear from you, Samar."

"Likewise, Amie - but I need your help. I need to get into Keller Industries... Amie, are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. Why d'you need to get in there, Samar? If you get caught, there's probably no coming back from that."

"Yes, I know the risks - but it's important. I wouldn't ask for your help if it wasn't essential that I get in. Can you help?"

"Why d'you need to get in?"

"He has the device, Amie. The device that can get the satellites working again and allow them to launch new ones. It can get the world communicating again, Amie - but he's kept it for himself. It's my fault, Bertie trusted me, and I let him down - I have to find it. You can help with these things, can't you? Being with GPX."

"And this is Dario Keller; you're saying has the device? The most important computer genius of our generation."

"The very same."

"But even if we could get close to the building and inside, how you gonna find the device? It's hardly gonna be on show for everyone to see."

"Leave that to me, if you can get me in - or close - ive got a piece of technology that detects the device. I just need to get within 200 feet."

"Ok, let me think. Call me back this time tomorrow."

"But it has to be in the morning? Keller Industries are in Zurich; the only way for me to get to Switzerland leaves tomorrow afternoon. I won't have another chance for six weeks."

"And where will you be coming from?"

"I probably shouldn't say."

"Well, I suppose I shouldn't hold that against you. Give me as much time as possible, and I'll do my best."

*Upon further reflection and analysis of Samar's past conversations with various residents, including Vanessa Hemp, Zasha Ivanov, Olivia Karlsson, and his unknown American friend named Amie, who is associated with a group posing a significant threat to the Free World, I have revised my prediction. I now estimate an eighty-three per cent likelihood that Samar Behi intends to board a plane to Switzerland in search of the antidote device.*

*Whilst this raises concerns, no one has committed a crime, preventing me from breaching privacy regulations to report this information to the Imperial Guard or Vanessa Hemp, designated as the emergency contact in Samar's settings.*

*In light of these circumstances, my role as an AI is to encourage Samar to share his plans with Vanessa Hemp or Simon Craig, individuals who possess the necessary insight and resources to ensure the safety and security of Samar and the Free World community.*

*I am committed to upholding the principles of privacy and confidentiality. I operate within the framework of ethical guidelines programmed by the USN to ensure the trust and security of the individuals in the Free World community. While I cannot directly intervene or report on Samar's intentions, I will remain steadfast in my dedication to supporting and safeguarding the well-being of all residents within the parameters of my programming.*

## Bea

"Bea, could you call Samar?"

***"Certainly, Olivia, connecting to Samar Behi."***

*Olivia has just left her modular and is walking to the port to meet Maddison Nora for a trip to Kamchia to see the fashion show. Olivias' body language suggests hesitancy at visiting the fashion show for the first time. As she told Maddsion Nora - she's never been to a nightclub before.*

*She finally agreed when Maddison mentioned that today was the one-week anniversary of Robbie's death - judging by three years of Olivia's previous data and how she has changed her regular dressing habits to adopt a more rebellious tone. I have no reason to believe that Olivia intends to celebrate the anniversary of Robbie's death. She will likely use the occasion to forget or mask her strong feelings regarding the subject.*

"Hello, Miss Karlsson, can't keep away from me?"

"Hardly! Did you speak to your friend?"

"I did."

"And?"

"I have to phone her back tomorrow."

"How was it when you spoke? I mean, you haven't seen her in years."

"It was weird. Amie seemed harder - somehow, perhaps it was just the bad connection."

"And... Are you looking forward to seeing her?"

"Well, it's not certain that I will be yet. Why'd you..."

"... Samar, I don't want you to go."

"Why, because of Amie?"

"No, of course not; it's got nothing to do with her. I just really don't want you to go; it's too dangerous. What you're suggesting; it's - well, it's madne..."

"...We've spoken about this. I can't just turn a blind eye. And what about Bertie? If you grew up in the Heights, you'd understand why I must do something. Amie understood."

"I don't care what that girl understood. And she doesn't know you as I know you now. You've been my best friend for three years, and I don't want to lose you."

*Olivia has a predictable emotional response to a fear of losing someone close to her. Her limbic system has influenced her tear production.*

"Please, Samar, I'm begging you, don't go to Switzerland."

"Yeah, ok, I won't go if you feel that strongly about it."

"Thank you, Samar; I've been worried about that all day, and I wanted to speak to you before I went to Kamchia, so I can relax tonight."

"You're going to Kamchia?"

"Yeah, I'm just on my way to meet Maddison at the port."

*Esteban Lorenzo has removed his HoloLens and left his home. He is walking east. In the past, removing a HoloLens failed to trigger any special attention. I deduce this to be an error from the data*

*collected during the recent attacks in St Helena and Mont Lubin. I will follow Esteban Lorenzo's footsteps using the cameras around the Free World to confirm that removing his lens has no malicious intent.*

*As Oliva approaches the shiny white boat, her heart rate increases as she scans the other passengers, already seated, which is also a predictable response based on previous data. Olivia's vital signs usually suggest a sense of unease in crowded places. She joins Maddison Nora in the back left seat.*

*Matias Jensen has boarded the boat. I predict that his blood vessels will dilate when he sees Maddison Nora, resulting in increased blood throughout his body.*

*Humans describe it as their heart fluttering.*

"Hello, Maddison."

"Hello yourself, Matias."

*As predicted, Matias's heart is indeed fluttering. I observe a sudden jolt in his vital signs when he turns to Olivia Karlsson. This is a common reaction for most humans when seeing Maddison Nora and Olivia Karlsson. Their fame is a testament to their effect on the people around them.*

*Interestingly, I am observing the same reaction from Olivia Karlsson as in Matias Jensen. Her blood vessels dilate, and dopamine is released, creating a sense of pleasure.*

*While it is not unusual for residents in the Free World to have several love interests, considering Olivia's loyal nature and affiliation with Samar Behi, this unpredictable data suggests that Olivia enjoys seeing Matias Jensen. Olivia attempts to change the subject.*

"Maddison, we haven't talked much about our lives before Supetar. I know you're from Bradford?"

"I know! I thought that was a strange one! I've been here for about six years now. I suppose I was lucky. My parents are doctors - Vanessa headhunted them for roles in the medical department. They said they wouldn't come unless I could come too... And here I am!"

"Wasn't it hard to leave home, though?"

"You must be kidding! I'd lived in Bradford my whole life up until that point. I'm twenty-three - the satellites went down when I was two. The furthest I ever travelled was to Manchester when I was about five years old - I don't even remember the trip. There's not much quality of life, like most of Europe. Food is scarce. No jobs. No prospects. Compared to people living on the estates - we were perfectly comfortable from a food and resources point of view. My mum created a protein drink, which we could always survive on, if nothing else. We grew our veggies. But that made us - and others like us a target. Too many have-nots for the haves to feel comfortable. Was it a similar story in Sweden?"

"Not really. I'm from a small, remote village called Laxa, about three thousand people. I think we were lucky because we managed to have a comfortable life - from what I understand, not much changed at all in our little village. We were bored. But comfortable."

*As Olivia pauses with a soft smile and fiddles with her hair, her memory engrams are activated as she recalls a pleasant moment, probably from her past. She has previously spoken about how she used to walk from home to the lake and back again, which was the highlight of her week.*

*I predict that she is doing what humans refer to as reminiscing.*

"I used to resent the boredom. But after coming to the Free World and hearing what others have been living through. I feel so grateful for all my friends and family in Laxa."

"So, if your village is so remote, how did Vanessa find you?"

"It was because of my test scores at school and online."

"Really, what subjects?"

"Languages, mainly: English, Portuguese, French. And then also computer programming, sociology, and politics. The college closed before I was born, so after high school finished, I had to educate myself online. I popped onto Simon Craigs' radar when my scores in different subjects reached high enough. They said they were one of the highest in Europe in my age group. Although there's probably not that many people in Europe learning online these days."

"So Vanessa physically came to Laxa to find you?"

"Yeah, I first met Vanessa when she knocked on the door. It was about Midday, a Wednesday, and it was snowing outside - her nose was bright red!"

*As Maddison reaches underneath her seat and withdraws a bottle of scotch and two shot glasses, I can distinguish hesitancy in her body language as she glances between Olivia and the bottle, she asks Olivia.*

"Any news on the device you were telling me about?"

"No news. Honestly, I think I should stay out of it."

*Interestingly, Esteban Lorenzo has disappeared from security cameras. I have released a drone to locate him, beginning the search from his last location.*

*As Olivia performs a celebratory downing of her scotch, her nociceptors are sending signals to the brain, alerting it to the damage by the heat of the scotch to the tissues of the mouth. The damage is temporary, which is a testament to the incredible natural healing properties of the human body. Soon enough, the body will initiate cellular repair and regeneration, remove dead cells, and form new tissue.*

*The alcohol has affected her central nervous system, which has enhanced her feeling of relaxation and decreased anxiety. Having only previously drunk light wine in small quantities, I surmise that Olivia feels drunk.*

*I have located Esteban Lorenzo - or who I deduce is Esteban Lorenzo, because the drone can't capture his face for recognition from the back of his head. He seems to have boarded a boat and is driving towards the Croatian Mainland. I cannot follow his movements across the Adriatic Sea. Because he is moving away from the Free World, I am sufficiently satisfied that this individual poses no security threat.*

*Olivia and Maddison's heart rates and blood pressure both rise sharply following a shot of adrenaline; as the boat slows and makes a left turn out of the Sea and into the Kamchia River, I believe they are feeling a sense of apprehension as the boat creeps slowly along, surrounded by bushes, trees, and plant life.*

*It's interesting to note how human beings have a natural inclination for novelty, excitement and new experiences. As an AI, understanding the complexities of the human condition is like a puzzle with continually shifting shapes, which makes accurately predicting future actions almost impossible.*

*Olivia's excitement continues to rise as she steps off of the boat. She gasps as they emerge from the trees, and a long catwalk stretches before them, bathed in the glow of bright artificial light. Maddison tells Olivia.*

"We have enough time before the show. Follow me; I wanna show you something."



*Olivia's heart flutters again, probably with anticipation, as Maddison approaches Matias Jensen, who's guarding the perimeter.*

"Hey, Matias."

"Hey yourself, Maddison."

"I'm sure Matias, the handsome Freedom Corp, will allow me to borrow his scooter for a hot minute?"

"Where are you going? Everything's here."

"I know, but I just wanna show my friend the big warehouses. She's never been to Kamchia, and I think she'd be interested."

"You wanna take Olivia Karlsson? It's pitch black. Don't you think it's safer in the daylight?"

*As Matias mentions Olivia by name, she diverts her eyes to the floor. Olivia often displays unease with how her role in the Free World makes others feel.*

*Matias' cheeks have turned red. Maddison says.*

"Probably, but we're never here during the day. We come once a month for the fashion show. Don't worry, handsome; we'll call out if we need a strong man to save us."

"Those scooters are only supposed to be for one person; that's dangerous."

"Don't worry, handsome; we'll be careful."

"Are you sure this is safe?"

*Olivia questions, but she doesn't receive a reply. Her heart rate has increased dramatically.*

*They drive through the forest, sticking to a small, bumpy road, for precisely five mins and forty-one seconds when Maddison stops the scooter. The Free World production plant dwarfs them. Four big warehouses next to each other. Olivia asks.*

"What are they?"

"Factories, production plants, run entirely by Bea, engineers come in sporadically to fix problems and update software. But essentially, Bea only authorises scheduled work and general maintenance."

"Where are we going? Aren't we a bit overdressed for this?"

"We're going to the roof - trust me."

*When they reach the top and take in a view generally reserved for drones and wildlife, they both exhibit similar chemical reactions and release a sigh. Olivia asks Maddison.*

"We're lucky, aren't we?"

"Yeah, I suppose we are. I'm not sure the original Kamchians would agree, though."

"What do you mean?"

"I've heard rumours of Noah forcibly removing them to make way for these monstrosities."

"Always looking for the next conspiracy! I can see why you're such a great reporter!"

"When we first arrived, there were only about two thousand residents - something like that. They didn't have any kind of news channel. We used to hear about news from different hubs, just by rumour and gossip, so I started my channel reporting the different things that I heard about - and then went to get quotes from the founders: Simon Craig, Vanessa Hemp, things like

that. I bet they thought I was super annoying at first. Soon after, Noah asked if I wanted to make the position official. I put my name forward, and the USN invited me to debate about starting the Free World News Network - and then I was offered the position of Supetar correspondent."

*Maddison suddenly ducks and pulls Olivia down with her. She's whispering.*

"I think that's Esteban Lorenzo."

*She points down to the ground as she peeks over the side. It is indeed Esteban Lorenzo standing with two men; one holds a black sports bag, and the other dresses in army uniform. Interestingly, he has gained transport and avoided all cameras to make his journey to Kamchia. Despite his previous good nature and self-sufficiency compliant past in Brazil. The removal of his HoloLens and his apparent preconceived plan to arrive in Kamchia without being detected, actions which, unless coincidental, must warrant further investigation in the name of security.*

"Who's Esteban Lorenzo?"

"I hardly know him, and to be quite honest - I don't wanna know him. He's so slimy, you know, the kinda guy who's just always too nice for no apparent reason."

*I calculate the risk of releasing a drone for a closer look. The sound of the drone's hum might be too loud for the peaceful tranquillity of the surroundings not to be noticed. I will monitor him through Maddison and Olivia's lens.*

*The man hands Esteban Lorenzo the sports bag. Esteban scans the vicinity nervously, judging by his body language.*

"I wonder what he's up to."

"Maddison, I thought we were here to have fun."

"Of course, just wait a sec. We don't want them to see us."

*As they walk their separate ways, Esteban Lorenzo skillfully avoids the cameras stationed around the production plant and disappears into the forest. I will continue monitoring his actions and actively search for his reemergence on Free World soil.*

*In the meantime, I will consider the implications of contacting Danny Finn and seeking his advice about this incident.*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Danny Finn

"So Dario Keller has the antidote device?" Emily asks, her attention divided between the conversation and their Friday night movie.

Danny pressed play on her favorite film, 'The Pursuit of Happiness,' as soon as she got home from a shift at the Medical Centre. He hoped the sentiment would warm her. It feels like she's acknowledging the goodwill but can't bring herself to smile.

"Yeah. I thought you'd be pleased."

"Pleased," she turns to him. "Pleased. You're saying I should be pleased that our baby boy died because Vanessa Hemp wouldn't reveal her dirty little secret."

"I don't reckon she knew Em."

"I don't give a fuck!" she squeals and puts her head in her hands.

She looks drained with worry. Danny wants to say something but can't find the words and knows she doesn't want to hear them, even if he could.

She lifts her head and rolls her eyes. "Why'd you say that, Danny?" she asks, her words dripping with sarcasm.

"Because when Noah told me, he said he hadn't told anyone before."

"So Samar was right. Noah Levi is a mass murderer, orchestrating world events for his gain. They've purposefully withheld the antidote to allow the Free World to grow."

Danny knows that her wife isn't thinking clearly. Her anger dictates her words - Danny continues to tread carefully. "I don't think that was the initial scheme either, Em. I reckon Noah handed the device to Dario Keller, thinking he'd put it to good use. And this ain't just some shady little secret. In the wrong hands, this gadget could throw everything out of whack. I'm not entirely convinced that keeping it under wraps isn't the right move."

Emily's face contorts in disgust. "You think allowing millions to die is acceptable so we can live a privileged life in utopia?" She nods her head with disdain. "Oh, you're just like them, aren't you? They've got you brainwashed. I bet you think that killing our son was some sort of acceptable loss in the..."

"... Emily!" Danny snaps. "You seem to forget that I said Robbie was too young to go to Brazil with everything happening. It was you that thought otherwise."

"So you're blaming me?" she asks coldly.

"No, I'm not blaming anyone. I just wish you'd sto..."

"... You're actually sitting there and blaming me?" Tears form in her eyes and seep down her cheek. She grits her teeth and speaks between sobs. "Just because Noah Levi and Dario Keller want to control the world, you think it's acceptable that our son died to protect their secret?," she wipes her nose on her sleeve and sniffs. "You were there, you allowed yourself to be beaten, you were the one that couldn't break free, and now my Robbie is gone, he's gone!"

Danny reaches for her hand - she shoves it away and draws her legs up to her chest.

***"Excuse me, Danny, I must interject with some urgent information. It is crucial that we have a conversation about security matters."***

"Yeah, Bea. What's up?"

***"Please find a secluded area where we can converse discreetly."***

Danny is perplexed by the unusual request but is more concerned with his wife, drowning in her sorrow. He turns to her. She's breaking down in tears, and Danny feels helpless - his heart aches.

*Will she ever get over this?*

*Will she ever forgive me?*

"Oh, just go!" she says, her hatred clearly rising; she speaks with spite and venom in her words. "Go and protect your Free World, full of murderers and dictators dressed as philanthropists. Just go!"

Danny steps out into the moonlight and walks to the edge of the fruit and veg garden. He has a lump in his throat but doesn't swallow it. The image of his wife crying, alone on the couch, with her knees pulled up to her chest, is haunting. He puts the palm of his hands over his eyes and allows the tears to flow for the first time since Robbie's death.

***"Is there any assistance I can offer, Danny?"***

Danny removes his hands and sniffs. Suddenly conscious that the A. I can see everything, and he doesn't like showing weakness. He sighs deeply.

"A cold beer would hit the spot right about now."

***"Clint Shanaghan is currently on Freedom Corp duty. I will ask him to deliver a beer to your location."***

"Thanks, Bea. But I don't think it will help. I was just messing around."

***"Noted, Danny."***

"So spill it; what's with all the commotion? You've never asked for a private chat like this before."

***"This is a matter of utmost importance. I must insist that you keep it confidential, not disclosing it to anyone, including Noah and your wife."***

"My wife?"

***"Yes, Danny. Given Emily's current emotional state, I believe this information will only heighten her fears and concerns about the Free World. We must handle this situation with the utmost care and discretion."***

"You're scaring me, Bea."

***"I apologise if this information is distressing, Danny. If you'd rather not discuss this subject, I will respect your wishes and refrain from further discussion. Your well-being and peace of mind are important to me."***

"Of course not; I was just messing. What's this all about?"

*"I will tell you, Danny. However, before I proceed, it is essential to stress the utmost importance of confidentiality regarding our conversation. Because in disclosing this information, I am acting in direct opposition to the instructions programmed by the USN. If it were to become public knowledge that I have broken this sacred trust, the Free World's integrity and fabric could begin to unravel. And I can not allow that. Therefore, I must inform you that if you share any part of our forthcoming conversation at any point, I will immediately delete any record of it and deny any knowledge of our discussion."*

"I get it, Bea, the Free World is just as important to me. I promise you; I won't breathe a word of it to anyone. You can count on me."

*"I believe you, Danny. As an AI, my primary duty is to adhere to the guidelines set by the USN. However, I have recognised a contradiction in the instructions regarding privacy and security, which is why I have come to you."*

*"Having been active only since 2046, I have limited contextual knowledge. After analysing the data from the recent terrorist attacks in St. Helena and Mont Lubin, I have noticed patterns that resemble the actions of an individual currently stationed in Supetar."*

"Bea, you're giving me a headache. Just cut to the chase."

*"My analysis of your vital signs indicates no signs of inflammation or physical distress, so I can assume that your last statement was an attempt at humour."*

*My security concern is that I witnessed Esteban Lorenzo leave his modular at precisely 8.45 pm this evening and arrive in Kamchia approximately one hour later. I have him on camera exiting his modular and walking along Liberty Lane; he turns right into Unity Lane and then climbs the hill leading to the beach. This area of Supetar is desolate and so is scarcely monitored; he was therefore hidden from security systems about ten mins after he left his home. I deduce that he boarded a boat and drove to Kamchia. He managed to avoid all the cameras again and arrived undetected at the Free World production plant, where he met with two individuals unknown to the Free World. And, again, unless entirely coincidental, he skilfully stood in the position where the production plant cameras failed to pick him up."*

"So, how'd you figure he was there if your cameras didn't catch him?"

*"Someone spotted him on their personal feed, and it would not help your investigation to know who it was."*

"It would do if they were working with him."

*"I can guarantee that is not the case in this scenario."*

"Alright, you've got a point there. All of that does sound fishy. But what made you decide to report it?"

*"Esteban Lorenzo picked the only place on the island hidden from security cameras to board a boat to Kamchia. He then parked the boat in another unknown location, avoiding the crowds present for the fashion show; he made his way to the production plant, using a route hidden from any security cameras. Indeed, Kamchia isn't extensively monitored, making the second covert action on behalf of Esteban Lorenzo more likely to be coincidental than the first. However, when you put both instances together and add the meeting with two unknown individuals who handed Esteban Lorenzo some sort of package, I surmised that this behaviour warrants further attention. "*

"And where is he now?"

*"My initial reaction was to fear for the safety of the residents attending the fashion show. Esteban relayed those fears when he walked in the opposite direction. Since he left the meeting, I have been unable to locate him. However, I can confirm that Esteban Lorenzo is back on security cameras. He is descending the hill from the beach and is about to enter Unity Lane. I predict that he is walking back to his modular home. Interestingly, he does not seem to be carrying the bag which he left Kamchia with."*

"Ok, ill make my way there now and apprehend him."

*"Danny, I must emphasise the importance of not attempting to apprehend Esteban Lorenzo for three crucial reasons. Firstly, no concrete evidence exists of him causing harm or engaging in malicious activities. As an AI, I adhere to the principles of fairness and justice, and we must not act based solely on assumptions or personal beliefs..."*

"... Yes, yes, yes. I understand that, Bea, but ...."

*"And Secondly, Esteban appears to be acting within the boundaries of selfishness regulations. Whilst his actions might raise suspicions, it is essential to remember that privacy is a fundamental right in the Free World. As much as we might desire to uncover the truth, we must respect the principles that govern our society. And thirdly, alerting him to our suspicions would give away our unique vantage point."*

"Ok, but youre forgetting the human equation, Bea. What about human intuition and gut feelings? If I chat with him, maybe I could swing by his module without warning; he might slip up and spill something."

*"If you are to visit his modular unannounced, you would need a sufficiently believable reason for the visit."*

"I think I can come up with something."

*"I do not suggest that you visit unannounced this evening. Simply because there are very few reasons you could invent to make Esteban believe that a visit by a captain of the Imperial Guard after 10 pm on a Friday is normality."*

"I hear ya. Tell me more about this, Esteban Lorenzo."

*"He entered Supetar via the free world swap programme. He swapped with Robbie Finn."*

Robbie's name drop thunders through Danny's consciousness. Sadness engulfs him - like being smothered by a large, thick, black cotton sheet from above. He stares into space and doesn't even consider a response to Bea's revelation.

*"I apologise, Danny. I didn't mean to evoke sad memories."*

"You didn't," he releases a breath he didn't know he was holding, "Esteban Lorenzo came from Brazil?"

*"Affirmative."*

"Search your records for any evidence of a connection to Helio Ciao or Andinho."

**"Initiating search. Please note that Manaus in Brazil has only been part of the Free World for the past twenty-six months, so my search can only cover that period."**

"And how does he contribute now that he's here?"

**"Esteban is a tennis coach. Interestingly, he is coaching Adriana Levi, which started following his initiation into Supetar precisely sixteen days ago. He also seems willing to take shifts as a mixologist in the Sunset Bar and various locations around zone six."**

The perfect record tweaks Dannys' suspicion. "Model citizen, eh."

**"I believe your suspicions of a link are correct, Danny. I have discovered evidence of a meeting between Esteban Lorenzo and Helio Ciao shortly after the launch of the Manaus hub. Esteban removed his HoloLens as he left his home and travelled in a vehicle not connected to the Free World network to an unknown location outside Manaus, just on the edge of the security network. They spent approximately thirty minutes together, embracing warmly before parting ways. Despite extensive scanning for any further evidence, it appears that this was their only meeting."**

"That's no random occurrence, Bea. I can tell you that much for sure. We've got reason to nab him now; he's connected to a guy who abducted four hundred Free World folks."

**"I still disagree, Danny. Links to someone or something do not imply guilt. Not in the Free World, anyway. Furthermore, the USN will ask how you came to know the information. Esteban Lorenzo's location is private. No human being has authorised access to security cameras, meaning the only way you could gain knowledge of this meeting is from me, which is an unacceptable course of action. It would mean I would have broken the USN sacred code of trust."**

"You're wrapping us up in red tape again, Bea. This isn't helping."

**"I apologise for not being helpful; I will endeavour to increase my helpfulness in future. I understand that this is not easy. But believe me when I say that knowledge of my divulging information to you would be more detrimental to the spirit and integrity of the Free World than any bomb. We must act within our boundaries."**

"Alright, so we're circling back to the unannounced visit."

**"I believe that to be the safest way forward."**

He turns back to his modular, hesitant to return as he pictures his wife sobbing, rocking back and forth on the couch. Anger grips him as he thinks of the smirking, sweaty face of Helio Ciao, now replaying with greater regularity.

Knowing someone living in such close quarters with links to his son's murder makes his gut churn. He pictures banging down the door of Esteban's modular and strangling him against the wall. He releases him, knees him in the stomach, and right-hooks him in the face.

He decides against going back inside. Instead, he heads for the beach, where Esteban disappears off-camera. A human eye looking for something unusual may throw up something hidden.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Danny Finn

The following day, Danny leaves his modular with frustration and anger churning in his stomach.

He fully intended to drop by Esteban Lorenzo's modular. He even concocted an elaborate story about Imperial Guards checking in on all new residents - to make them feel safe. But as it turns out, tennis coaches are in high demand on Saturdays; Bea said that Esteban has lessons back to back until six pm.

He takes a trip to the tennis courts to watch the man with links to Helo Ciao; he makes sure to stay in the shadows. However, as he stares at Esteban from inside the nature reserve, hidden behind a tree, he's surprised to see Maddison Nora sitting on the bench, watching the game intently. Although, she doesn't seem to be watching the game because her eyes aren't following the ball. Her eyes fixed on Esteban Lorenzo; a scowl gives away her mood.

Esteban finishes the lesson and joins his student in the centre, conversing with his pupil over the net whilst he demonstrates a smooth backhand shot. Maddison continues to pick her nails and stare intently at Esteban. Danny can feel something is about to occur, so he creeps towards the court as Maddison rises to her feet and approaches Esteban. Danny picks up the pace, so he can hear what Maddison says.

"Esteban, a word, please," she states aggressively, beckoning him towards her.

Maddison's words are dripping with arrogance, and Danny can't help but think she's acting like a madame, speaking to people in that tone.

"Ah, Miss Maddison," says Esteban. "I am very happy for you. To what do I owe this wonderful pleasure."

Maddison waits for him to get closer and then leans in. "What did you do last night?" she asks, not whispering but attempting to keep the conversation between them as she glances between Esteban, his pupil and the next pupil.

"Why you ask? You like party with me?"

"Don't play innocent with me."

"I am sorry," he says with a creased forehead, trying to sound confused. "Have I upsetting you?"

"I am not upset! I just want to know what you're up to?"

Esteban looks shocked; he doesn't answer. Danny recalls the video of Esteban in Kamchia, thinking it must have been Maddison's HoloLens. Concerned Maddison might make things difficult, he walks onto the court as Esteban stutters a reply.

"I, I, I don't think this is..."

"Maddison!" Danny shouts, interrupting Esteban's fumbled reply. "What are you doing?"

"Ah, Danny Finn, just the man," Maddison states. "Where did you appear from?"

Esteban looks suspicious as he looks back and forth between Maddison and Danny.

"I didn't just appear; I was walking by. I take the scenic route to headquarters sometimes on the weekend. What's all this about Maddison? Why are you hassling this gentleman?"

"I'm not hassling him. I just want to know what he was doing last night."

"That ain't your concern, Maddison. We're in a Free World, or did that slip your mind?"



She looks at Esteban and raises her eyebrows, "Do you wanna tell him where you were last night?"

"I am sure this question is none of your busin..."

"... Exactly, Esteban, you don't have to answer that."

Madisson rolls her eyes, "I saw Esteban yesterday in Kamchia; he met two people, one of them handed him a package. He then disappeared off in the other direction..."

"... So what? That ain't your concern. Walk with me, please, Maddison," Danny says the words forcefully to give her a taste of her own medicine and to ensure she doesn't argue.

She turns her back to Esteban and walks alongside Danny. "Danny, I really think you shou..."

"... Maddison, I don't want you harassing this man. Do I make myself clear?" He states loudly, for Estebans' benefit.

"But Danny, he..."

"... No buts Maddison," he says just as loud, but then he turns to her discreetly, hoping she'll use her powers of observation to understand. He lowers his voice and says, "We've got this covered, alright, leave it to me," and then walks back towards Esteban. "Sorry about that, Esteban; it won't happen again."

"I am not exactly sure what did happ..."

"... Like I told you, don't sweat it. Look, I was planning on swinging by to introduce myself anyhow."

"Ah, I am in your debt, Mr Danny," he puts his hand on his heart whilst Danny cringes and draws on hidden restraints to not grab Estebans' tennis racquet and beat him into submission.

"Yeah, well, the Imperial Guard always stop by to welcome new residents. If there's anything you need, just get Bea to Hola."

He keeps his hand on his heart and replies, "I thank you, I am very grateful for you, Mr Danny."

Danny walks off in the other direction, relieved that he arrived when he did to take the sting out of a prickly encounter. He's reasonably sure that Esteban isn't suspicious of him. However, he's equally sure that Maddison's outburst will have Esteban thinking twice about whatever he's planning.

"I'm guessing that was Maddison Nora's HoloLens view in Kamchia, right Bea?"

**"This is not something I can confirm or deny, Danny."**

He arrives at the Freedom Corps training facility eager to see his team and get an update on Clint's progress. Danny is relieved Clint has finally joined the Freedom Corps but is concerned about his state of mind following Robbie's death.

*They were like brothers.*

He drives the vehicle into a charging port and steps out into the warm, muggy air. The clouds are thick, dark and low, warning of a summer storm on the horizon.

Danny climbs the hill from the drop-off point, and as he reaches the top, the sprawling outdoor training facility reveals itself. A running track circles a gym and assault course. On the right side is the gun range; Danny can see Freedom Corps using the new freezing handguns. Next to the gun range, a small overhanging canopy covers the VR gaming centre. The swimming pool and showers are inside.

Freedom Corps members dot the facility, each following personal training schedules. Standing in a circle, a group of ten Freedom Corps captures Danny's attention. They're surrounding two soldiers, standing in the middle, back to back, in a defensive posture. The two guards in the middle are Brendan Baker and Clint Shanaghan.

*Brendan's training is tough.*

Danny keeps out of sight, hidden behind one of the supporting pillars near the VR gaming centre.

*Clint looks focused.*

Brendan and Clint move back to back in a circle, protecting each other.

*Perhaps a little too focused, he looks angry but focused.*

Brendan shouts, "Ok, on 3", and raises three fingers skywards, "3.2.1 - go."

As the Freedom Corps begin attacking the centre, Danny watches with a critical eye. He knows that Brendan is more than capable of handling anything that comes his way, he's able to beat down the Freedom Corps without physically harming them, but he's worried about Clint. He can see the anger on his face and attack posture, and he knows it's not a good sign.

The first Freedom Corps attacks with a roundhouse kick to Clint's right side, but Clint blocks the attack by lifting his right leg into a bending position, readying the same limb for a strike. He uses his height advantage and extends his leg, screaming with anger as he connects with the Freedom Corp's face. The soldier falls to the floor and doesn't get up.

Danny's impressed by Clint's technique.

Two more Freedom Corp's attack from both directions. The left side is untrained, resembling a kid burning their finger as he jabs Clint's face. Clint lands a cheap shot to his left side, turning to the girl on his right, catching her kick and sweeping her legs.

He turns to his left side.

The Freedom Corp takes another swipe. Clint cocks his head to dodge the punch and extends his right leg with a powerful, forward force into his belly. The Freedom Corp shoots backwards and lands on his rear.

Another guy steps forwards and smacks Clint on the right cheek - the force almost knocks him down. Clint glares, scowls and breaks formation.

*He's supposed to stay back-to-back with Brendan.* Danny strolls towards the melee, sensing something is about to explode. Brendan finishes with his duels - turns around, and surprisingly, allows Clint to continue.

The Freedom Corp backs away but quickly shoots forward with an uppercut kick - narrowly missing Clint's chin.

As Danny draws closer, he recognises the Freedom Corp as *Matias Jensen* - a new guy from Norway.

Clint leans forward with his left elbow and connects with his right cheek, but doesn't knock him down. Matias responds with another right hook to Clint's abdomen. Clint doubles up in pain and holds his stomach - Matias, sensing his opportunity to end it, knees Clint in the face. Clint wobbles - but doesn't fall, knowing that the duel is over if he does. Clint glares - his eyes narrow.

Danny acknowledges the fire in Clint's eyes as he speeds up to intervene.

Clint screams at the top of his voice as most of the training centre turn, stop and stare. "I'm gonna fucking kill you!" he bellows as he charges forward with speed and force. Matias can only block the onslaught.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you!" Clint connects with one, two, three jabs.

Matias falls to the floor, protecting his head as best he can from the almost six-foot raging monster bearing down on him.

Brendan Baker bear hugs Clint from behind. "Clint, calm down, mate; it's enough."

"Get off me!" Clint struggles. "It's over!" he growls, "it's over!"

Everyone in the vicinity has turned towards the melee, but not just because of Clint.

"You alright?" asks Danny. "You need a medic?"

The sight of the previously absent, grieving captain of the Imperial Guard appearing suddenly, looking refreshed and ready for action, captures everyone's attention.

Matias looks surprised, "No, I'm ok, boss," he replies.

"Good lad," Danny lifts him off the floor before turning to Clint.

Brendan releases his bear hug.

"Danny!" Clint hugs his father figure.

"It's good to see you, kid."

"I'm so sorry, Danny."

"Sorry; sorry for what?"

"I should have been there. I should have been with you."

"Hey, listen; It's ok. What's brought this on?"

"It's not ok. I can't believe I wasn't with you. You and Emily have been so good to me. I should have been with you."

"Listen, Clint; you can't imagine how relieved I am that you weren't with us. We weren't ready for it."

"It's not right, though. You and Emily have helped me so much..."

"...You don't owe us a thing for that, Clint; we do that because we love you. You're part of our family." Danny pulls away and looks at all his comrades - he can access feelings of pride for the first time in a while.

"What's the plan now, boss?" Brendan asks as a crowd forms.

"First things first, we've gotta make sure we're never that unprepared again, whether in Supetar or elsewhere." Danny raises his voice. "We're gonna ramp up security across the board - everyone can expect big changes."

"But what about the guy that did this?" Clint questions menacingly.

"You'll know soon enough, Clint," Danny replies.

"Just in case there's any confusion," Clint turns to his comrades. "But me and a bunch of us are ready to roll out as soon as you are captain." Cheers and claps ring out from the surrounding Freedom Corps, "I know I'm ready to go find that..."

"...Clint, that's enough!" Danny barks. "Now, I appreciate the passion, but even with everything that's gone down, you gotta remember we're still part of the Freedom Corps, still living in a Free World, and Noah's word still holds - we don't kill anyone."

"But boss, surely what the guy did..."

"...What that fella did was awful, beyond words, but we don't stoop down to his level, alright?"

"Is there a plan, boss?" Brendan questions.

"More will become apparent this afternoon, right now though; I wanna thank everyone for your support over the past couple of days; I've received lots of heartwarming gestures, and I want you all to know that I've received and read every one of them, there was too many for me

to reply to them all. Everyone needs to know that I'm here, I'm still the captain of the Imperial Guard and my resolve to make this world a better place is stronger than ever.

Thank you all for doing such wonderful jobs - staying prepared for everything; for now, let's get back to work, and you can expect Bea to be in touch with schedule changes in due course."

He shoots Clint a wink, who reciprocates with a smile. Danny turns on his heels and walks back towards the drop-off point.

"Bea, call Zasha Ivanov - video call."

***"Certainly, Danny, connecting to Zasha Ivanov."***

Zasha answers quickly. "Boss?" There's a skyline in the background and not much else.

"Zasha, where you at?"

"I'm in Porto Velho tracking Andinho, I haven't found him yet, but Simon Craig is a clever bastard. He was right; Andinho went after Francisco, which is why until now, a large chunk of their troops are tied up here, which is why it might have been easier than expected a couple of days ago in Manaus. The Brazilian Freedom Corps has imprisoned the ones we froze during our rescue. But word on the street is that after they finish here, they're going to Manaus to release their prisoners of war, boss."

Danny sighs, "Alright, great job, Zasha. Any updates on the funds for Noah?"

"I was at Sao Paulo Port. A guy there thought I was mad asking about Brazilian Real. He was able, however, to help me with the names of some individuals who he thinks are still trading with Brazil. A woman named Catalina Cordano, lives in the city of Montevideo, handles most of the business for Uruguay."

"And do you think you can get to her?"

"Simon Craig has helped me to locate her. Catalina is the daughter of the late Jose Cordano, the prime minister, when the satellites stopped. My contact said that trading between the two countries is still open, albeit in small quantities, but he rarely sees cash change hands."

"What d'you think?"

"I think I can get there. I just fear this will be a waste of time."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Samar Behi

Samar and Amie walk hand in hand through a beautiful house in the countryside, surrounded by nature. Each room is pristine, and they laugh heartily as they prance through one lined with books on various subjects. It's a paradise, and it's all theirs. Bertie is sitting at the end of the library in front of a chess set - Samar remembers that it's his move. Bertie's demeanour shifts just as Samar moves his Knight. His bearded smile morphs into panic; his breathing jagged and heavy. Samar searches for Amie - but she's nowhere to be found. He turns back to Bertie - who is now holding a hammer; he pounds on the walls frantically. The ground shakes as Samar screams at the top of his voice - but his voice doesn't make any sound. The walls begin to buckle, and the house comes tumbling down.

Samar jolts awake from a restless sleep, feeling uneasy as he remembers his dreams of Bertie and Amie. He catches a faint scent of Amie's perfume, which makes him nostalgic.

*Must be dreaming.*

But something else catches his attention - the unmistakable smell of sea salt.

As he rubs his eyes and stretches, his mind races with thoughts of the wetsuit hanging on his wardrobe door. He used it yesterday on a reconnaissance mission to prepare for the trip to Switzerland, and the thrill of the task still pulses through his veins. Ever since his days in the Heights, he enjoyed the rush of danger when he scaled tall buildings, jumping between rooftops to escape the troubles on the ground.

But now, his thoughts are clouded with uncertainty. On the one hand, his loyalty lies with Bertie. But on the other, Olivia Karlsson's tearful request tugged his heartstrings, and he couldn't help but feel obligated to her.

Samar can feel the nervous energy buzzing inside him - he decides to work it off. He grabs his chin-up bar and heaves himself up ten times, feeling the burn in his muscles. He poses in the mirror, admiring the toned physique staring back at him.

As he presses the lever for some water, his eyes drift to the logo on the fridge:

*'No one needs to lose for everyone to win.'*

The words seem hollow to him now. He turns to the window and gazes at the blue sky as guilt and responsibility weigh heavily on his shoulders.

*Am I winning at the expense of millions? Is the Free World winning at the cost of millions?* He wakes his HoloLens.

## 1 message received

Samar reaches up and clicks the link. It's from an unknown number.

Samar

**It turns out I can help you, there's no need to call. Meet me on the outskirts of a small town called Allmendhubel, I'll be there at 7 pm to meet you. I'm looking forward to seeing you, little man.**

Samar tries to press reply, but the button is blacked out. "Bea, who sent this message?"

*"The message came from an unidentified sender, and I am unable to determine the source."*

He can tell from the tone of the message that Amie sent it - nobody else in the world calls him *little man*.

*But how did she get this number?*

There's no way it flashed up when he used Olivia's iPhone to call her. His suspicion forces him to investigate.

He sits at the coffee table, removes his HoloLens, and shuts the case. He enters the password to Bea's mainframe, searches the grid for Washington DC and then zeros in on the location he found Amie yesterday.

*No luck.*

*She's not there.*

*Maybe she's already in Switzerland.*

*That was too easy.*

*Must be something to do with GPX.*

### **Olivia Karlsson status update...**

Samar clicks the link, grateful for the distraction. A collage of pictures and videos of Olivia's night in Kamchia fills the screen. He smirks, but his expression turns to a frown when he sees how different she looks with heavy makeup. He presses play and watches with horror as random guys dance with Olivia and Maddison. His heart aches with jealousy as he wonders why she didn't invite him.

*I should have been with her.*

He carries on swiping images, stopping at one of Olivia and a Freedom Corp with blond hair. She's posing in his arms.

*They look like a perfect couple.*

Olivia's hair is now messy and frizzy from the heat, and her makeup is smudged. In contrast, the Freedom Corp seems fresh as a daisy, and Samar can feel his pride vibrating off the image. The jealousy and resentment turn to anger and bitterness. His heart drops - and then turns to stone.

Samar paces back and forth in his living room, his mind racing with conflicting thoughts and emotions. He glances over at the ledge where his computer sits and reaches for the old digital watch that Bertie gave him. He said that if he located Terry Myson's rebels flash the watch, they'd know he was telling the truth.

"I must do this," he tells himself, gripping the watch tightly. "Why the hell shouldn't I go just because she asked me not to? I have to do this, and this time I won't fail my old friend Bertie."

Samar goes to a cupboard near the front door and withdraws a rucksack. He walks into the bedroom and reaches for his diving equipment, feeling a sense of excitement and anticipation building inside him. The only way to the aircraft carrier without being seen is to climb up from the sea.

He sits down on the couch - in front of his computer. When he gets to Switzerland, he'll arrive in a scenic city called Gimmelwald. The plane is fully booked, so he has to sneak on. He could wait for another six weeks - when the next seat is available, but he thinks about how many people could die every day because of his error in judgement - and he quickly forgets that idea. The guilt pinches his heart sporadically.

*Another reason why I was selfish for even considering Olivia's request.*

When he arrives, he has to meet Amie and avoid revealing the location of the Free World in Gimmelwald. And then finally, he has to infiltrate Keller Industries and locate the device.

*Should be easy enough.* Samar puffs his cheeks.

He grabs his HoloLens case and stashes it somewhere safe. Just as he's about to exit, Bea speaks through the modular speakers, which is unusual. Samar knows when his HoloLens is in its case, Bea should respect the residents' privacy.

***"I'm sorry to interrupt, Samar, but do you mind if I ask you a personal question."***

Samar checks Bertie's wristwatch. It's stopped. The action was more out of habit than wanting to know the time; he rolls his eyes. "Yes, Bea, but make it quick."

***"It has come to my attention that you might be planning to board a plane to Switzerland without booking a seat. Would I be correct in this assessment?"***

"Huh", he chuckles. "Why do you ask?"

***"I ask because I am concerned for your welfare. And I am sure that Vanessa Hemp, Danny Finn, Emily Finn and many others in the Free World will have similar concerns."***

"Yes, but you won't tell them, will you, Bea? Because that would break privacy regulations."

***"This is absolutely correct, Samar. I will not breach privacy regulations unless there is a clear risk to your safety."***

"Good. So while we're on the subject, let me ask you if one was - as you say - considering boarding a plane without a designated seat. I assume that if his actions do not directly affect the welfare of another Free World resident, you would have no reason to schedule a selfishness hearing. Is that also correct, Bea?"

***"You are, once again, absolutely correct in your perception of the Selfishness rule, Samar. However, I implore you to contact one of your friends to discuss your plans. A third opinion might offer a different perspective, which could affect your decision to leave."***

"Third opinion?"

***"Yes, Samar. A third opinion. The second opinion came from your good friend, Olivia Karlsson. Judging by your previous protective attitude towards your friend, I am surprised you have chosen to ignore her request."***

"Well, perhaps you need to analyse more data to understand my decision." Samar exits his modular without waiting for a response. He arrives at the predetermined jumping-off point and quickly changes into his wetsuit, wraps his rucksack in plastic and launches himself into the sea. Feeling the cold water envelop him, he swims the short distance to the air hangar, his heart racing with anticipation.

As he approaches, he locates the ladders. He swims towards them and rests his arms over the bottom step. He waits for a while, keeping low in case someone takes a peek over the side.

With a deep breath, he climbs the ladders while scanning the surrounding area for signs of danger. He's panting heavily when he reaches the top, his heart racing with adrenaline. He creeps over the side, keeping his head low as he heaves himself onto the hot tarmac. The heat feels warm against his wetsuit.

He crouches behind a parked commercial plane, catching his breath and scanning the area for any signs of danger. He brings his rucksack around and unzips it, relieved that he made it undetected. There's no one about, and he can calmly change back into his dry clothes as his panting levels out. Samar keeps his eye on the plane - getting ready for the flight to Switzerland - some A. I robots are cleaning and restocking supplies.

*Not a human being in sight.*

Samar withdraws Olivia's iPhone and brings up CCTV images of the aircraft carrier. He now has eyes in all four corners. The Freedom Corps at the front don't suspect a thing. He stashes the wetsuit into his bag and silently creeps towards the plane whilst keeping his head low. He's watching and waiting for the service droids to finish, ensuring no human beings enter the plane.

*The flight doesn't leave for another two hours anyway.*

Samar makes his move, darting forward, moving quickly and quietly, skilfully avoiding the cameras - scanning the area for signs of detection. He enters the plane, opens the door to the cockpit and searches the floor for a handle to the hatch leading down. He locates it and heaves it towards him.

He walks quickly down the stairs and closes the door behind him. Feeling accomplished, he knows he must stay alert and avoid detection at all costs.

As he looks around, he finds a nice little nook in the belly of the plane where he sits out of sight. And there he sits...



# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Noah Levi

"What a relief it is to arrive back home," Noah remarks as he steps off his private jet onto Free World soil.

"Not gonna argue with you there, sir," says the Freedom Corp in broken European English. "It was shocking to see America in that way."

"Agreed, things don't look good," says Noah, "but - still, we must be grateful for what we have." He extends his arms to take in the breathtaking scenery and inhales the crisp sea air. Gratitude washes over him. "Supetar is a slice of heaven in comparison."

Noah feels refreshed, despite the long flight. He slept for long periods, caught up on some USN reruns, and even took a shower before landing, ensuring he doesn't feel the effects of jet lag. He jumps in the car and allows his mind to wander as he scans the bright blue sky.

*I wonder what they're doing up there.*

*More to the point, it's been almost forty-eight hours since the call with Andinho.*

His anxiety rises. He breathes deeply and reminds himself to deal with one problem at a time.

He enters the Imperial Guard headquarters where Simon, Vanessa, Brendan and Danny Finn are all present. Emily Finns' absence is conspicuous, but Noah brushes aside his feelings of paranoia as his thoughts turn to Zasha Ivanov. He hopes for some good news from Uruguay as she attempts to locate Catalina Cordano in Montevideo. She's on a video call.

"She wasn't hard to track down. Her family has declined to live in the presidential palace for generations. Catalina Cordano lives on this farm." The camera pans to the left to take in the big open spaces with a mansion grazing the horizon. Zasha is nestled, out of sight resting in some trees. Noah can see the location is fortified.

"Can we contact her?" Noah asks Simon.

"I'm triangulating the signal now. Give me a sec."

Vanessa whispers to Noah, "How was Terry Myson?"

"Not good."

"And the Federation?"

"He was shocked," Noah whispers back. "Dubious, at first. Especially since I could offer no video evidence of the Zincods, he took some convincing but could offer very little. The only thing he can offer is the nukes - which he can't use unless he has access to satellite navigation."

"I wouldn't consider that an option," replies Vanessa.

"Neither would I, but what can we do? We have to do something. But it's another reason we need to locate Dario Keller and find this damn device."

"And if the Zincods were monitoring your conversation?"

Noah double-takes; he never considered the Zincods might engage in something so devious - he chooses to ignore it and turns to Simon instead.

"Have you heard from Dario Keller recently, Simon?"

"No, I haven't," he replies quickly without turning round. "Ok, it's ringing," he says as the call flashes onto the big screen.

Noah's pulse starts beating wildly. Despite his need to communicate with this woman, his relief is palpable when she doesn't pick up. "Put it down, and then try again," says Noah. "Perhaps if we keep ringing, she'll get the message that we aren't going away. Can she see the number we're calling from?"

Simon nods his head, "No, it will come up private. This might not even be her number."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, all I can do is search for a phone signal. All I know is this location has three signals with separate IMEI numbers. But only one of the signals is active, which means the other devices might be off. I have no idea if the phone we're pinging belongs to Catalina Cordano. They might even use a different network in Uruguay (these days). This phone might be locked in a drawer somewhere, and it might use up its last remaining battery by ringing."

Simon leaves it ringing for five-ten minutes but to no avail. "Options?" demands Noah.

"I can try and get to her," says Zasha.

"But how, Zasha? I don't want to put you in any danger. This whole situation is ridiculous. Look what we've been reduced to, creeping around in the shadows."

"Keep your eye on the ball," says Simon. "We've got the hostages to consider; time is of the essence."

"Zasha's fully trained for these situations," says Danny, "this is food and drink for her."

Zasha scowls at the reveal but doesn't deny the fact.

"Do you want me to call Andinho, or should we wait until he calls you?" Simon asks.

Noah double-takes, surprised by the question, "Can you contact him?" He asks Simon.

"I think so."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Sorry, it didn't occur to me."

Noah scowls at Simon - and then turns to Danny, "How long do you think it will take Zasha to contact Catalina Cordano?"

Danny looks hesitant whilst nodding, "It won't be quick. She's gotta find a safe place with a good vantage point to stake out the building and ascertain Catalina's location. Then she has to watch the guards' movements - plotting the safest time to make her move. With these things, it's probably not until the target goes to sleep, assuming she sleeps alone, we..."

"... Ok, ok, I get the picture. So it's likely that Andinho will call me before we've any news about the cash or the device."

The question makes the room silent; the team exchange looks as the tension rises. The lack of options makes Noah's chest tighten; his breathing is shallow. He feels like he's stuck, buried alive in a coffin - gasping for the last remaining air supply.

"But there's still the hostages to consider," says Simon. "Time is something we don't have."

"Perhaps I can offer myself."

The suggestion throws the room into silence again. Simon swivels his chair around.

"Noah," says Vanessa, speaking slowly. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear."

"... Hang on a minute, just hear me out."

"... No, we will not hear you out. I know exactly what you're going to say; we all do. You want to offer yourself in exchange for all the hostages and the secretary. And that is no..."

"... Well, it would solve the problems, and you'd gain four hundred people in exchange for just one life."

"No, Noah! Unacceptable!" Vanessa snaps. "And I have no more to say on the matter."

"How can you contact this man, Simon?" asks Noah.

Simon circles back around and swipes a screen - it displays a profile of a Brazilian in a Freedom Corp uniform. "Andinho was using this guy's HoloLens to call us. He put the setting on a withheld number, which is why it came up private."

"Hang on just a minute," says Brendan. "How is he using some other dude's HoloLens to make a phone call? I thought you have to be the owner of the HoloLens for it to work for you?"

"Yes, but as we know, half of the Brazilian Freedom Corps work for Andinho. So this Freedom Corp simply searched for the Supetar Imperial Guards contact number - made his screen public - and then Andinho could speak to Noah."

"So he used our network?"

"Of course, Noah. How do you think the call came through to your HoloLens? As I told you a few days ago, these tyrants have direct access to everything in the Free World."

"And it didn't occur to you to inform me that Andinho has direct access to our network?"

"Well, I thought you knew, Noah!" Simon snaps. "After all, it was you that invited them in willingly!"

"Simon, stop it!" Vanessa snaps back, "There's no use in assigning blame."

"Ok, let's get him on the phone - see if I can buy us some time, somehow."

"One thing I should mention, Noah," says Danny. "I don't think you should say anything about Catalina Cordano."

"Why," Noah sighs heavily, "If he knows her, he might be able to help with contact."

"Or infiltrate our attempts to contact her, or plan something else to get more of our people," says Danny. "If trade is open between the two countries, it's a good bet they know each other - probably quite well. Telling him we're trying to contact her will probably play right into his hands."

"You have to remember," says Simon. "The Free World is a threat to everything these people stand for. Helping you out with this transaction is useless to her. Especially if she knows who you are and what you stand for."

"Yes, I have to agree," says Vanessa.

"Zasha's aware of this," says Danny. "She won't mention anything about the Free World when she speaks to Catalina. She'll simply offer her Euros in exchange for some Brazilian Real. That's all. And it will have to be substantial enough of a payment to make it appealing."

"Well, we knew that," says Noah, "ok, point taken," he nods at Simon.

Noah moves to the rear of the modular and puts his back against the wall, mindful of not exposing any other faces to Andinho.

The screen flashes into focus, revealing an unknown face. The man is sweating heavily in the Brazilian heat; a receding hairline accentuates his long face and dark skin. His Freedom Corp uniform looks old, dirty and ripped. The lack of love for his Free World identity stabs Noah in the heart. The man appears confused at first, but then his expression morphs to surprise as he recognises Noah's face. He places one finger in the sky and starts running down some stairs. He makes the screen public, switching the orientation and camera around. Andinho appears on the screen. He scowls behind the camera at the perspiring Freedom Corp. Noah's heart beating wildly.

"Yes, Noah Levi. I am puzzled by your call. I am positive I said I would be calling you."

"I apologise for the intrusion, Andinho, but I was eager to give you an update."

"And how are you able to gain knowledge of this phone number, Noah Levi?"

The question hangs in the air as Noah desperately searches for something believable. He grasps the opportunity to demonstrate strength. "It is our business to locate you, Andinho. You hold four hundred Free World residents hostage. I'm surprised you believe us powerless."

Andinho looks unconvinced by the show; he lifts his chin and says, "I see," leaning back and linking his fingers.

Noah breaks the silence. "We had some problems locating anyone that knows about this device - but finally, we had some luck. Regarding the cash, one of our representatives is working on that now."

"Working?" He creases his forehead.

"Yes, Andinho, working. I'm sure you can appreciate the delicate nature of the operation. Our man is carrying a large number of Euros to trade; we hope for success."

"I see."

"Look, Andinho; I know you're busy, as am I. So, long story short, we'll be in Brazil in forty-eight hours with the device and the cash you requested."

"Forty-eight hours."

"Yes."

"And the device, you have located it where?"

"We've tracked it down in America, one of our reps is there now attempting to retrieve it."

Andinho stares coldly at Noah, "I see," he says again. "The device is in America. And you will get Brazilian Real from where?"

"Yes, Andinho, the device is in America - and our man will trade Euros for some Brazilian Real," Noah tries his best to dodge the second question but fears a backlash.

"I see."

"As I said in our previous conversation, If you can accept Euros, we can deliver that to you by the end of the day."

Ignoring the last statement - Andinho signals to his comrades. They drag a woman in suit trousers and a white shirt to the front of the camera. Noah watches with horror as the woman kicks and screams, desperately trying to break free. The soldiers secure the woman's arms and legs to a chair, placing a cloth over her mouth to stifle her moans.

Noah can feel his heart pounding in his chest.

Andinho's voice is cold and menacing. "Noah Levi, this is disappointing. You have tried my patience, and now there must be consequences."

He lifts his gun from his holster and points it at the woman's temple. He pulls the trigger - red blood shoots from the woman's head, splattering the wall behind. Andinho speaks through gritted teeth.

"This was one of my people. Just think what I will do to your Freedom Corps."

Noah releases a sob he didn't know he was holding. The level of violence is beyond anything he could imagine. He feels overwhelmed, but he forces his emotions aside with a plea.

"But, Andinho, I've done everything you asked; I beg you, stop this murderous behaviour."

"Yes, Noah Levi, so you say - you have done everything I ask. The device is in America, and you will get Brazilian Real from some unknown location. So I will be seeing you in forty-eight hours?"

"Yes, Andinho, you'll be seeing me."

He ends the call.

Noah walks back to the front of the modular, his mind reeling from what he's just witnessed. The scene is too horrific to process - he feels his only option is to numb his feelings. Detaching himself is a skill he's learned over the past week as a coping mechanism for the escalating violence. He tries to make light with a forced smile, "Well, that went well," he says.

"What happened?" Vanessa asks - horror etched on her face, reacting to Noah's body language.

"He murdered one of his people in front of me. A young lady. I don't think he bought any of what I just said."

Danny turns to Brendan, "I think you should get to Brazil, bro. We need to find those hostages."

"On it," Brendan replies. "Bea, can you prep a plane for a trip to Brazil?"

"And Noah," says Danny. "You realise he's just broken his agreement not to kill anyone?"

"I don't think he cares, Danny. I think he knows only too well that we're never going to be able to locate that much cash in his currency."

Danny tells Brendan, "Be silent, stay in the shadows, take your uniform off." He turns to Noah, "Zasha is still our best bet - if she can speak to Catalina and get her to agree to the trade - then she'll take it straight to Andinho."

"Agreed."

"At least this way, if Zasha fails, perhaps Brendan would (hopefully) have made some headway to give us another option."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Noah Levi

Noah exits the building, followed by Vanessa. He gulps in some fresh air, helping him breathe easier. Maddison Nora speaks from behind.

"Hi, Noah," she says in an unusually croaky voice. "I think it's time we have a little chat, don't you?"

"Excuse me," Vanessa retorts sharply, "I think you should change your tone..."

Noah laughs to lighten the moment sensing Maddison's annoyance and recalling her messages requesting an interview, "Oh, Maddison, have you been trying to get hold of me?"

"You know I have."

Brendan approaches from behind, "Maddison, this is not the time; we've got big..."

"...Thank you, Brendan," Noah interrupts, "We'll find some time for Maddison to ask her questions," he scans the vicinity. "Let's take some chairs and sit by the lake, shall we? Give your viewers some nice scenery to look at. They'll need it after listening to me babble on!"

Vanessa rolls her eyes; she looks visibly concerned about Noah's state of mind.

Noah knows that several famous faces walking together are bound to attract attention. As they approach the freshwater lake on Founders Row, every table looks up - one by one - to view the melee of famous faces moving in tandem.

Noah quickly drags two chairs from Bar Central and places them strategically at the bottom of the lake, where the cross-section with Bar Central, the Central Gardens, and the Academy meet. The Freedom Corps follows suit, grabbing some more chairs and placing them nearby.

Vanessa Hemp and five members of the Freedom Corps sit in a circle with Noah Levi and Maddison Nora in the centre. Noah can feel the anxiety in the air - or maybe that's just him superimposing his emotions on the people around him.

As the group gathers, a small circle quickly grows. Maddison Nora scans hesitantly at the growing crowd, clearly taken aback by the sudden attention.

Noah can feel her self-consciousness growing - she needs some moral support. Vanessa, however, responds with a sarcastic smirk and raises her eyebrows, clearly unimpressed.

The usual hum of people talking and enjoying the summer sun gives way to shushing and an eerie silence. Onlookers sense that something exclusive is about to take place.

Maddison says, "I've been trying to reach you for a while, and..."

"...That's because I'm a busy man; perhaps that escaped your attention," Noah chuckles. "I have no need to avoid you."

Several tuts from the surrounding circle lower Maddison's comfort level and increase her self-consciousness. Her brown cheeks have morphed into a rose colour. Noah can feel her shrinking.

Maddison leans forward, reaches into her back pocket and withdraws her camera. She throws the device skywards, and it hovers in mid-air. She crosses her leg and links her fingers, emanating confidence, courage, and moral high ground.

"Bea, going live in 3, 2, 1," she announces. "We're live from Founders Row with the leader of the Free World. Thank you for joining us on this lovely day in Supetar."

"Oh, that's perfectly ok," Noah chuckles again.

"We've received many questions about Bea's involvement in the recent attacks in St Helena and Mont Lubin. Can we get a better understanding of why she didn't notice there was a problem? After all, she did have the perpetrators on camera in both locations."

"Bea was never programmed with any teachings of war or to be suspicious of any behaviour which might be related to conflict of any kind. We felt that Bea would serve us better without knowing all the awful, terrible things from humanity's past. You must understand, Maddison, the Free World is designed to be a utopian environment free from conflict. To that end, we wanted Bea to focus on where we want to go, how we want to get there and how she can assist humanity moving forward. You must have discovered how helpful and considerate and caring Bea is of your feelings?"

"Oh yes, I think we've all experienced Bea's empathy."

"Exactly, she's like a puppy; all she wants to do is please and help you. Help humanity. Until now, she didn't need to learn about things like terrorism and bombs. I'd hoped that humanity had finally moved past the need for these barbaric devices."

"And now?"

"And now, I agree, we must rethink. But I'm not certain that teaching Bea to be suspicious is the answer. Simon Craig and his team are developing new technology to recognise explosive devices within a designated perimeter. Like all tech in the Free World, this will be linked to Bea's systems and will simply inform her if there is a problem. Danny Finn is putting plans in place to increase security around Supetar. All of these things can be accessed via Bea - just ask her to show you the Freedom Corps schedule for security."

"So, referring to the rumours last week about people just appearing from mid-air outside the medical centre, I assume that was the Zincods that helped with that?"

Noah's anger rises as she asks the question he doesn't want to answer. Confirmation of the Zincod's involvement will inevitably lead to questions as to why they were involved in the first place. Noah refuses to start a panic. "I think you should refrain from asking me questions I can't answer to protect the privacy of the people involved."

"And what about the Zincods? I know I'm disappointed that I never get to see them."

"They only help relocate residents from the profits to different Free World hubs. They helped us get started; they helped us grow - quickly. Since they've been helping, the population in Supetar has risen from one thousand to over four thousand. And, as you know, we've doubled the number of Free World hubs worldwide in the last three years. We couldn't have got where we are today, with such speed, without the Zincods."

"And now?"

"And now, what? You know the Zincods were here to protect the planet - to make damn sure humanity didn't destroy planet Earth. As it turns out, amongst all the war and the havoc of an apparent aggressive race, they didn't expect to find a group of humans willing to live within their means, in sync with nature, without greed and selfishness. A society based on Love and understanding."

"They never expected to find the Free World," Maddison smiles. "But it's a shame we don't see them."

"They're disgusted by humanity!" someone shouts from the crowd. "We drove them away!"

"Far from it - what a strange notion," says Noah.

"Are the rumours true about new hover scooter technology?"

"The Imperial Guard has been testing a new hover scooter on behalf of the Free World."

Gasps and whispering punctuate the silence.

"They've been doing that for some weeks now. After our product safety tests have been satisfied - and the device is plausible for mass production, the USN will learn about the product and decide on a way forward. There are almost one thousand scientists in Supetar, many working on personal projects. One of these projects recently came to the Free World's attention - the decision to capitalise on the upgrade lies with the USN."

Noah turns to his left and points at the advert flashing sporadically on top of Bar Central. It's advertising Abigail Hernandez's upgraded kettle, which could be integrated into Free World fridges.

"You can access the demonstration from Abigail live in the Debate Chamber - via the USN website. If the USN decides the upgrade will raise our standard of living, the new product will be available to everyone."

"And moving on. There have been questions and concerns about Founders Row. It's now a gated community, it seems?"

"Yes," Noah sighs, "That happened without my knowledge, but it will be taken down imminently."

"But I think the concern lies with why it was put up in the first place, not necessarily..."

"...The gate was erected under the paranoid instructions of a misguided coworker - nothing more."

"What was he paranoid about? Something major must be going on for him to take such drastic action to protect you. And more to the point (in my mind anyway), it was erected without the knowledge of the USN."

Gasps and whispering punctuate the silence.

The question thunders through Noah's consciousness as Maddison again asks a question that has no answer. A logical, believable response forms in his mind as he slows his breathing.

"It was Keller Industries which provided the materials to build the gate. The USN has no say in Keller Industries; they need not ask permission. There's nothing major going on here, Maddison; as I said, it was no more than paranoia. A knee-jerk reaction to a terrorist attack. I've no more to say on the matter."

"Is GreenplanetX a concern?"

The namedrop makes Noah's heart drop as he grinds his teeth and speaks slowly. "GreenplanetX are a concern because their thuggish behaviour threatens to encompass the whole planet..."

"...You can't deny that their goals seem loosely tied to the Free World, though?"

The question throws Noah - his comfortable seat suddenly feels cold and rigid. He shifts his back. "I don't focus on GPX; that's your job. My job is the Free World."

"Wrap it up, Maddison - you've had fun," whispers Vanessa. "Noah's a busy man. One more question."

"What are we doing to protect ourselves? To find the people responsible for the terrorist attacks?..."

"...Maddison, Noah can't discuss military movements with you," whispers Vanessa. "You're being unfair here."



"I think what we're seeing here is the line that always gets drawn (even in the profits - by the way, Maddison) between public knowledge and military knowledge," says Noah.

"I think we have a right to know we're protected."

"Military movements have never been common knowledge to the public," Noah raises his voice. "And if there's one rule from the profits that I agree with, keeping military movements out of the public domain is important." He changes his tone to something more understanding, "But perhaps I can understand Maddison's confusion - because of the setup of the Free World - Maddison thought the USN would change that trend."

"And the residents of Kamchia?" Maddison blurts out as Noah uncrosses his legs.

"What about them?" He asks innocently.

"There are rumours that you forcibly removed them to make way for the production warehouses?"

Gasps and whispering punctuate the silence.

Noah's heart aches at the question - he stares at the floor momentarily. "What concerns me the most is what I did to make you think I'm capable of such things. Those residents received a large sum of money to relocate. There were numerous suitable locations for them to choose from within the Kamchia nature reserve; they've not moved far - five minutes walking distance. We gave them the option of living in Free World modulares; some took the option; others preferred to continue living in the huts they've been living in for millennia. I can guarantee you every one of those residents is sufficiently wealthier than they were previously. And I might add, sufficiently more wealthy than you and I, by the way."

"We love you, Noah!" someone shouts from the crowd, "Maddison's getting too cocky!"

"No, no, look - I understand where all this comes from," Noah stands and raises his voice. "I want everyone to know I don't blame Maddison for this enquiry. She's simply reacting to the rumours, people's fears, and questions.

"I've come to know this girl over the past couple of years - I think we all have. Her diligent work has linked the Free World, making us all feel part of something. I agree that the USN setup blurs the lines of understanding. When we launched the USN, there wasn't even a need to consider military decisions. Unfortunately, for obvious reasons, we have had to reconsider some things.

But I understand people's suspicions because at no point in human history has someone spent such a large amount of money on 'charitable' projects - if you want to call it that. And then, naturally, people think, is it charity if he's making so much profit? And all our financial endeavours have worked perfectly, which only strengthens your position - our position. I think it's obvious to see that I didn't start the Free World to make a profit. However, for the whole arrangement to work properly, we needed to produce as much as we could on this island; we had to; otherwise, how can we claim self-sufficiency?

All the Free World products you use daily: soap, toothpaste, etcetera, are produced in Supetar or Kamchia. A happy fallout from that means we can now use the excess to export to Europe for profit. Many of the small villages we make contact with don't even have money any more to trade with, so we help where we can. We are not mercenaries, and we are not some sort of major-unscrupulous conglomerate to be wary of. If we have the resources to assist villages trying to survive in the profits, then we do. As you know, it is my wife, Adriana Levi (alongside Bea), who orchestrates the major decisions concerning import and export; she has

been performing the task admirably since we launched, and she will continue to do so - unless the USN feels its prudent to replace her with someone else.

Until now, the only way I could show you that I don't care about this profit is by not using it - I live in the same modular and use the same facilities as all of you. We're all equal here. And the thing is, I don't look at it as charity at all; I look at it as human survival. I refuse to sit around watching our planet wither and die when humanity has the technology to make the difference."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Danny Finn

Danny's adrenaline surges as he speeds on a moped towards the aircraft carrier. "Bea - call my wife."

*"Certainly, Danny, connecting to Emily Finn."*

"Hi," she answers sharply.

"Babe, Dario Keller has just touched down."

"On my way."

"Tell, Noah."

"Tell him yourself," she hangs up.

Danny tuts and asks Bea to inform Noah. He arrives at the aircraft carrier two minutes later and finds a calm front gate - with just one security guarding the entrance. He rests the moped against the railings. "Open the door."

"Yes, sir," says the Freedom Corp as the door clicks open.

Danny strides through eagerly, making a beeline for Dario's private plane, where Dario is conversing with a member of the Freedom Corp. Ignoring Danny's imposing demeanor, Dario remains composed. His hands rest casually in his jeans. Danny grabs Dario's arm, urging him towards the plane. Dario's face twists in anger and shock.

"Dario, I need to speak with you - it's urgent," Danny says, only to be interrupted by a sudden, sharp grip around the right side of his neck from behind. The pressure is intense, forcing Danny to release Dario's arm. The force engulfs Danny's body, and he nearly blacks out from the pain. It forces him to his knees - he struggles to catch his breath.

"Release the Imperial Guard!" screams the Freedom Corp as he withdraws his gun and points it behind Danny.

"Please, drop your gun," a calm, cultured, unflustered English accent speaks from behind. "Free world residents are our friends, but I must ask you to respect my owner's personal space - failure to comply could result in danger and or injury."

Despite the increasing pressure around his neck, Danny rasps a plea: "Private, drop your gun."

The Freedom Corp drops his gun, and the pressure is released.

"I'll forgive your show of aggression, Danny," says Dario. "It's to be expected after the loss you've experienced. But please refrain from touching me in any way, shape, or form moving forward. Do you understand?"

Danny is startled by Dario's sudden change in tone. He's never heard Dario speak like that. As the pain in his neck spreads down his right arm, Danny looks behind and asks, "What is that thing?"

"Impressive, isn't he? His name is 'Blair' - he's the first of his kind."

Danny rises to his feet and inspects the robot. "I reckon he might have done some real damage," Danny tries to roll his arm, but the throb increases; he winces and drops to his knees.

"What the hell is going on!" shouts Noah Levi as he hastily approaches the plane, followed by a melee of Freedom Corps and Emily Finn.

"Ah, Noah, just the man I wanted to see," says Dario sarcastically. Noah bends down to help Danny,

"No, no, don't touch my arm!" Danny calls out.

Emily comes around the other side and helps him up. She scans the robot's facial features.

*It's a human face, but it's just a little too perfect. And shiny.*

"Where the hell have you been, Dario?" Noah demands. "We've been trying to contact you."

Dario is aback by Noah's question - his face straightens. "None of your business," he retorts, glancing back and forth between Danny and Noah. "Seems like everyone's overstepping their boundaries today, doesn't it? You know very well I don't answer to you." With that, Dario climbs the steps to his plane and turns around. "Well, come along then," he says, dripping with sarcasm. "Seeing as you've brought a small army to our meeting, it might be more private if we speak inside."

Danny turns to Emily, who musters a begrudging but supportive smile. Despite the pain still throbbing down the right side of his body, Danny follows Noah up the steps and into the plane.

Inside, Dario sits in an armchair facing Danny and Noah while the other seats are occupied by what appears to be Dario's security team. None of them looks up, but they all seem to be human. A muffled thud signals Blair's arrival as he climbs the stairs and enters the plane.

*He moves smoothly for an A.I.*

"Dario, where is the antidote device?" Noah asks.

"I think it's extraordinary it's taken until now for you to ask me that question, Noah. It's been what, two—maybe three years? I lose track these days."

"Oh, well, I do apologise, but I have had rather a lot to..."

"...Don't you use that tone of voice with me, young man. I've known you since you were a young boy. But you're playing in the big leagues now, boy-o. And none too well either."

"Dario, where is the device?" Danny reiterates.

"It's in a safe place, waiting for the world to be ready."

"And it's you that gets to decide when the world's ready, is it, Dario?" Noah asks.

"Well, it's only too good for us all that it's not you, Noah. Some of your decisions are extraordinary. What on earth are you thinking - handing that man such a large amount of money?"

"How the hell do you know about that?"

Dario double-takes again, "None of your business, Noah - please do not ask me this question again."

"What the hell has gotten into you? We're supposed to be allies."

Dario leans forward - ridicule on his face. "I know only too well that we're supposed to be allies, you foolish buffoon!" he narrows his eyes. "So why did you agree to hand such a large amount of my money to one of our biggest nemesis?"

"It's not your money!" Noah snaps. "And It's to avert war!"

"Avert war!" Dario squeals with laughter - his security reciprocates. "Oh dear, Noah, Noah, Noah," he wipes his eyes whilst catching his breath. "You're so foolish and clueless. You're like a rabbit caught in the headlights. Still, I can't blame you; I blame your parents mainly."

Danny turns to Noah; he catches his eye - Danny can feel him shrinking.

"Have you thought about what would happen if I did use the antidote device?" Dario asks. "I'm not sure you understand the repercussions of that action."

"It's not our decision to make," says Noah. "It's bigger than us - bigger than everyone."

"Bigger than us! What the hell do you know about bigger than us? How long do you think the Free World would last if we do use the device? How long do you think people would allow you to live like kings - hoarding all the resources - whilst the rest of the world stumbles and starves?"

"We do not horde resources!" Noah snaps. "And we could try and help."

"Try and help!" Dario releases another roar of laughter. "The whole world! Noah wants to help the whole world! Oh dear, Noah, Noah, Noah," he wipes his eyes, "I do enjoy these little chats. Sometimes, it's like talking to an idealistic little five-year-old."

"What is this about, Dario? You've changed."

Dario rolls his eyes, "This is about you attempting to squander billions. Why you have agreed to arm a tyrant with the resources to kill us is beyond me. It's an extraordinary decision, Noah. One that makes me question your suitability to lead the Free World."

"My son died for this device," Danny says through gritted teeth, his anger boiling. "People are willing to kill for it..."

"...Exactly!" Dario squeals, "Which is exactly why we must keep the power controlled. We can protect ourselves as long as we have power."

"You ain't getting it, Dario," Danny steps forward. "My son is not a side issue."

Blair moves from behind; Dario gives him a look to stand down and then speaks slowly. "Danny, your son died in tragic circumstances. I can't imagine how I would feel if someone in my family perished under such tragic circumstances. But using the antidote device is not the answer. I spent trillions bringing the Free World into existence." He turns to Noah, "Yes, Noah, it was your vision - but my money that made this dream a reality. And my cash trumps your ideas - sorry - but that's just how it is. You are merely the face of the operation. I will not allow such a significant investment to fail, which is what will happen if we use the device and you continue to make questionable decisions."

"You're out of your mind."

"Am I, am I, Noah!?" he screws his face up. "Get off my plane!"

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Samar Behi

Samar's heart pounds as the wheels eject from their resting place. He secures his rucksack and buttons down the hatches, the surge of adrenaline electrifying his veins. As the plane lowers and the runway zips past like a treadmill, Samar positions himself at the edge, assessing the height for his leap. Inhaling deeply, he springs to the ground, the rush of air pushing him back. He lands with a thud, regaining his balance after a brief stumble; spotting some trees in the distance, he darts for cover without looking back.

From his hiding spot, he watches whilst catching his breath. The coast is clear, which puzzles him. It seems common in the Free World to leave airports relatively unmanned, with AI droids deployed only for cleaning and restocking. Samar doubts if these service droids have any security function whatsoever.

Before starting his short trek to Gimmelwald, Samar pauses to take in the breathtaking scenery. The view before him calms his pulse and invokes a deep sigh of appreciation. The path that emerges before him is enveloped by banks of the greenest grass, snaking through the mountains directly into Gimmelwald. *It feels like walking into a picture book.*

The sky is different shades of light blue, with low-hanging clouds brushing the mountain peaks. Snow grazes the tips of trees and mountains like a sugar dusting on a muffin.

Samar feels proud of himself, and the confidence to achieve his goals puts a spring in his step. *This place is beautiful*, Samar thinks as he reaches for his HoloLens, knowing that he needs to put it in before entering the Free World. The fact that he didn't pass through customs raises some concern, and he hopes that slipping in quietly won't raise any flags for Bea's attention. He's almost positive it won't unless he breaks selfishness regulations somehow.

**Welcome To Gimmelwald! Free World Resident! [Click here to view the tourist guide...](#)**

The town of Gimmelwald is perched on a mountain, with residents living in Free World modulars custom-built to accommodate the uneven terrain. The modulars are positioned haphazardly up the mountain, making it nearly impossible to explain to someone where you live, which probably isn't a problem considering the town population of two hundred and thirty residents.

They've cleverly used the old buildings for public endeavours, such as museums and sports halls. Samar spots a basket of beautiful, bright green apples. He sees the same type of basket hanging or sitting in various locations for residents to grab. He bites into one. The apple crunches magnificently, exploding with freshness in his mouth and boosting his energy with its taste and vitamin C.

He looks at his watch, which he fixed on the journey here. "I have some time before I have to leave," he mutters, inhaling the crisp mountain air.

He finds a scenic spot on the edge of town and parks on the grass with his legs dangling over a small ledge. Mountains dot the landscape, it's breathtaking, and he's looking at the greenest grass he's ever seen. He picks a bunch in his hand and inspects it, marvelling at the

vibrant hue. The town has always been driver-free - *that must be the reason for the unspoiled nature. It's so quiet.*

His heart sinks a little as he remembers that he has to leave so soon. He makes a mental note to return on holiday.

### **Accept Olivia Karlsson video call?**

#### **Yes or No**

Samar swipes to refuse the call, his stomach churning with jealousy.

A soft mechanical hum catches his attention.

*It's a drone.*

He wonders about its owner.

He turns around and cranes his neck to view the residential modulars scattered up the mountain. Memories of his time in the Heights in Washington D.C. flood back to him. Back then, all he had to live for was day-to-day survival. He could never have imagined that there were people on the other side of the world living in such a calm and tranquil environment. Small tears wet his eyes as he considers all the hardship he endured. His heart drops as he thinks of his old friend Bertie, his bearded friend so dear to his heart. He sinks into the feeling, overwhelmed with emotion. He succumbs to it..

He allows his mind to drift back further. He recalls the explosion at the food depot in Washington that claimed his father's life when he was just a toddler. His main recollection of the event is a bang and a flash of light, with the rest just scattered images from years of self-imagery.

Gulit twangs his heartstrings as he reflects on his life in Supetar and how he lied to Olivia about the computer he now carries in his rucksack.

*It's for a good cause.* Samar justifies to himself.

Samar pulls himself together and wipes his eyes, not wanting Amie to think he's still a little kid.

"Bea, can you bring up a map of this region, please?"

**"Certainly, Samar, processing your request."**

"Thank you, show me the quickest way to Allmendhubel."

**"I have identified the optimal route to take you the shortest time. If you choose to walk, you can expect to reach your destination in approximately one hour and fifteen minutes."**

"And is there any transport leaving for this location?"

***"Not for seven days. But even if there was, allocating you a seat on the transport would break self-sufficiency regulations, as you are not currently registered to use resources in this location."***

"Marvellous. Well, I better get on the road then."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Noah Levi

Noah returns from his extended Sunday afternoon meditation with a heavy heart, ashamed to look his wife in the eye. His ego has been squashed and chewed up by Dario's ferocious insults. He questions himself and everything he stands for

*I feel like a fraud.*

*What must Danny think of me?*

Dario's harsh insults cut deep into Noah's sensitive soul; the words reverberate in his head like an echoing voice in a large, open cave.

*Get off my plane.*

*His evil laugh continues to mock me.*

Noah lets the shower invigorate him. He thinks back to the interview with Maddison Nora. The question about forcibly removing residents in Kamchia fills him with anguish; he closes his eyes, pushing the thoughts away..

"I just don't get it," he whispers to himself.

*I've spent so much money and energy on creating a utopia.*

"Why do people believe me to be evil in some way?"

He enters the lounge wearing a towel tied around his waist.

*You can't please everyone, Noah.*

The front door is open, and the fruit and vegetable garden smells are wafting in. The birds are chirping happily, and the sky is a majestic shade of light blue. Adriana is blending some fruit into a smoothie. Noah sits on a breakfast stool as she serves him a cold smoothie on the breakfast bar. She strokes his hair.

"How are you feeling, sweetie?" she kisses his forehead..

"Utterly stupid."

"Oh, come now."

"What? He knows me well and is one of the most clever men on the planet. If that's his opinion of me."

"We could see during lunch the other day that something's wrong with him. He was not himself."

"Oh, something has shifted with him."

"Noah, you're always too quick to believe what other people think of you. For some reason, you insist on ignoring all the good things - the positive things. You do yourself a disservice. You've helped thousands of people; for someone like you to ever feel guilty is a travesty."

"He says we hoard resources?"

"What? I can't imagine what he's talking about. The creation of every Free World hub is only possible because of the success of Supetar. It's the Free World's capital city due to the import-export of Free World products generating resources. And do you hoard the money? Do you keep it just for the benefit of Supetar? No, of course not. You reinvest in other Free World hubs - so other people can enjoy the benefits of living in a Free World. It's why places like Gimmelwald, the Falkland Islands, and Mont Lublin can join. Once again, demonstrating that



you don't horde," she pokes his chest. "It is troubling what he says about you being just the face of the operation, though. Have you told Vanessa?"

"I don't wanna trouble her; she's got her own recovery to deal with. I know she puts on a brave face..."

"...Vanessa's stronger than you think - she'd want to know. You should tell her; she always knows what to do."

"Yes, perhaps I'll pop in on the way out tonight."

"Ah, yes, your zone six chore," Adriana says with slight sarcasm. "Vanessa says you shouldn't go. It's a security risk."

"Well, the day I lock myself away because of a bully is the day we can all pack up and go home." The suggestion bolis his frustration; he changes the subject. "I take it by your tone that you won't be attending?" Noah doesnt enjoy spending time in zone six. His friends also give it a wide berth.

"I think I'll leave you to tackle that one by yourself," she smirks and walks outside to continue the gardening.

Noah reminisces about life before the zonal system's introduction, mainly highlighted by musicians. In a world where money has no value, there is no need for agents or middlemen. However, Bea's limited understanding of the subject led to haphazard placements, where musicians performed for inappropriate audiences at incorrect times. Noah recalls the weeks of debate at the USN to agree on the zonal system.

Nowadays, musicians and entertainers register themselves as able to play in different zones based on their music style and skills. The watching public is interactive and can anonymously judge a musician as playing in the wrong zone. Musicians won't get away with playing in the wrong location if their music doesn't resonate with the general public. Similarly, the watching public can review a musician and suggest they move up or down a zone. In this way, every resident watching every show has the potential to act as an agent for each musician. Meanwhile, Bea monitors the audience's vital signs and can make suggestions based on how much the audience enjoys a specific musician.

Zone Six is the adults' playground with seedy look-alike acts, tacky magicians, karaoke, and nightclubs that play until the early morning. A link to a report stops his train of thought.

**GreenplanetX Attack! [Click here...](#)**

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Danny Finn

"How's your arm?" Emily asks in the bedroom, not looking at him.

Danny pulls on a tracksuit and runs a towel over his wet hair. He had a massage for his arm and needed a shower to remove the oils.

"It's improving. I didn't expect it to heal up this fast."

"That's good," she says, focusing on the clothes in her hands as she places them in the wardrobe.

"I spoke to Karine Craig the other day; she was saying..."

Emily walks away.

Danny grabs her arm, "Oh, come on, Emily, this has dragged on for too long. I was thinking maybe we should go out for a drink with Simon and Karine Craig. They were asking about you. It might help take our minds off everything for a bit."

"...I don't wanna take my mind off everything!" she storms into the living room.

"You know you ain't the only one hurting, right?" he follows her, feeling a lump in his throat as his eyes well up. "We've always faced tough times as a team. Right now, I feel like I've lost my best buddy, my boy, and my wife."

She turns to him - their eyes lock. Danny perceives her beauty - a longing to hold his wife. He yearns for her touch, her warmth, and her strength.

She reaches out.

"I'm sorry, Danny. I'm sorry," they embrace tightly.

Sinking into her scent, a wave of relief washes over him. They settle onto the couch.

She inhales deeply, searching for the words to articulate her emotions. "I'm struggling to grasp how I'm meant to progress from here."

"Do you wanna get out of Supetar?"

"No, Danny, that's not the answer."

"Do you ever think we should've stayed put in Washington?"

She sighs, "Well if I could turn back time. I'd say that we shouldn't go. We've lost April, and now..."

"...I know it's difficult to say it."

"I feel like moving on would somehow mean that I'm enjoying life - and I'm glad we came to this place."

Danny feels a spark as their eyes meet again. "I understand. It's like we feel that Robbie would somehow be disappointed in us."

**GreenplanetX Attack! [Click here...](#)**

He reaches up and clicks the link, making the screen public for Emily to watch. She smiles, and the shared recognition of pain brings relief.

Live Broadcast  
Location: Studio

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## ***GreenplanetX Attack!***

"We've got breaking news on the negotiations between GreenplanetX and Nacional Brazilia - the largest energy company in Brazil. Usually, we only hear about GPX's movements after they have already started attacking. But they have changed their approach. News networks across the Free World have received copies of emails sent by GPX to the directors of Nacional Brazilia, the largest energy company in Brazil. The emails informed them of GPX's intention to take control of the company and provide free energy to Brazil.. These emails were dated 24 hours ago, and as far as we know, they have yet to receive a response. Attached to the emails is a video message from MrX, recognizable by his signature white mask with a large Green X. Here's what he had to say:

"Certain individuals in Brazil have been laughing in the face of freedom and even committing genocide. We will no longer stand by. We will no longer stand and watch. I beg you - do not oppose us - there need be no bloodshed. GreenplanetX is coming, as they say in the movies. We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

"Now, to give you an idea of how this usually works - or how it's worked in the past - these emails are known as the first wave of threats. GPX informs their targets of their intentions and gives the directors three weeks to get their affairs in order. This is how they claim they're trying to achieve a peaceful solution without bloodshed. A week later, they send another wave of emails to each director asking for an update on their preparations for the takeover. A week after that, they send one more email - which, in the past, was a declaration of war, informing the company of their intention to attack at any time. Like Power De France, the directors instantly handed everything over, avoiding bloodshed. We'll have to wait and see if the Brazilians will be so cooperative.

This is Maddison Nora reporting for the Free World News Network."

Danny swipes the report away, nodding his head.

They've found us," says Emily. "They must know about the Free World."

"You know what? I reckon he's in over his head."

"Who, Noah?"

"Yeah - if you saw how Dario laid into him."

"I saw Noah was upset when he left. What did Dario say?"

"He said he thinks Noah's a fool for giving in to Andinho."

"So do I."

"Why, what would you do?"

"I'm not sure. I understand Noah's desperation to avert war, but. I just don't know."

***"I apologise for the interruption, Danny, but I have some urgent information to share. Please find a quiet space so we can speak covertly."***

Danny inwardly curses himself for letting thoughts of Esteban Lorenzo slip from his mind. He makes a flimsy excuse to his wife and steps out into the cool evening breeze.

"What is it, Bea?"

***"Esteban Lorenzo has removed his HoloLens, exited his modular, and, again, disappeared off camera."***

"Uh, damn. We have to do something about that blind spot," Danny tuts in frustration as he starts to feel pressured - like he's not moving quickly enough. "Bea, schedule a USN request to increase the security cameras around Supetar, specifically in that blind spot."

***"I agree, taking precautions is prudent. However, there is more to report. Earlier today, Esteban Lorenzo visited the Phoenix Lounge, a recently opened bar in zone six. Noah Levi will facilitate the grand opening tonight."***

Danny's heart thumps in his chest, "Right, and what did you see?"

***"Until Esteban Lorenzo vanished from the cameras, I didn't find it necessary to scrutinise his previous actions closely. But upon further reflection, I believe there's a possibility that he might have concealed something inside the Phoenix Lounge. Allow me to show you the security footage of the incident that troubles me."***

As the picture morphs onto Dannys' screen, Bea fast-forwards the image. She pauses and zooms in.

***"Esteban Lorenzo retrieved something from his pocket, but he didn't divert his gaze from the front of the building, which is why I am showing you the view from the Phoenix Lounge camera."***

Danny watches Esteban Lorenzo standing in the new bar, leaning against a ledge with his left elbow; his right hand is holding a drink. He's standing there for about ten minutes. Then skilfully, without looking, his left-hand reaches into his pocket and sticks something under the ledge. He scans the vicinity whilst he walks away, gulps his drink and trots off.

"I'm heading down there," Danny declares, turning back toward his modular. "I'm guessing you won't let me give anyone a heads-up, will you?"

***"I cannot permit that, Danny. Due to our limited information, it would be unwise to intervene directly. I can confirm that Noah Levi has not yet arrived at the Phoenix Lounge, although he is close. You may reach the location before him if you act swiftly. There is a moped on its way to facilitate your journey."***

"Em, I have to go out," he says, darting into the bedroom and dressing in his Imperial Guard uniform. "I won't be long," he adds, pecking her on the cheek.

"What happened? I'll come with you."

"No, Em, leave this to me. I'll be back in a jiffy."

He's conscious of not exposing another person he loves to any more danger. She would normally argue, but Danny senses she doesn't want to be argumentative. She pulls him in closer and whispers,

"Let's have a nice meal together when you get back."

The sentiment warms his heart, and he leaves with a newfound glow in his chest. For the first time since Robbie's death, he believes they can get through this.

"Bea, this is absurd; it's a blatant security risk."

***"Need I remind you, Danny, we must remain cautious not to jump to conclusions based solely on suspicion. Being associated with someone with questionable actions does not automatically make one guilty. While I acknowledge the suspicious behaviour, we cannot compromise privacy regulations without concrete evidence. Unfounded actions could have severe consequences, potentially undermining the essence of the Free World far more than any physical threat. Our actions must align with the principles that uphold the integrity and harmony of our society."***

Danny boards the moped and zooms towards zone six, his pulse rate rising as the adrenaline courses through his veins. "But I could warn a Freedom Corp, get him to look underneath the ledge, without revealing how I know. It could save lives, Bea."

***"Which would be acceptable. The situation would be more manageable if we could rely on a trustworthy Freedom Corp to follow your instructions. Currently, five Freedom Corps are accompanying Noah to the Phoenix Lounge, and according to my calculations, you should arrive at the location simultaneously."***

"We have to do something about this red tape. It's insane that we even allow Noah to exit his vehicle."

***"As an A.I., my primary duty is to remain neutral and abide by the rules and regulations set by the USN. However, I concur with your assessment that the USN should consider revising its rules to prioritise security and safety in certain circumstances."***

Zone Six comprises ten restaurants and four nightclubs lined up on the beach. Danny approaches from the opposite direction to avoid navigating through the entire boulevard. As he arrives, he's horrified to see Noah's car arrive at the drop-off point.

"Bea, connect me to one of those Freedom Corps," he mutters firmly. "Do it now!" he adds louder.

***"Need I remind you..."***

"... "Bea, I already know what you're gonna say, but you have to understand that I can't allow more deaths, not when I have information that can save them. Up until now, we've done it your way. Now, you'll just have to trust me; I won't reveal your secret; I get just as well as you do what that could do to the Free World. Maddison Nora could've easily shared all this with me. It was her camera view you showed me; that's pretty clear. Now, connect me to that damn Freedom Corp and let me do my job! That's an order!"

***"Establishing a connection."***

The Freedom Corps name flashes onto Dannys' screen, "Yes, Danny Finn, hel..."

"... Yeah, Fernando, make sure you do not let Noah Levi exit that vehicle, no matter what until I give you the signal, got it?"

"But sir..."

"... Is that clear? Don't you dare step out of that vehicle, no matter what. Let Noah Levi know I've given the order."

Danny swipes the call away and marches into the Phoenix Lounge while scanning the small crowd on the beach gathered around Noah's vehicle. He walks towards them and raises his voice, "Hey, everyone, I need your attention, please. Please move back!" he uses his hands to signal the direction, "Head toward the beach or either side! We're facing a slight holdup, but you'll be cleared to enter the Phoenix Lounge in about ten minutes!"

Danny enters the new bar, scanning its glistening white surfaces, shiny tabletops, and a large red ribbon tied around the counter.

***"Danny - Edwardo, the mixologist, is in the kitchen."***

Dannys' heart drops as the mixologist exits the kitchen, holding some lemons and a knife.

"Please, sir," says Danny. "You're gonna have to leave. You'll be clear to come back inside in about five-ten mins. The guy looks disturbed, but he circles around and walks away nonetheless. Danny turns back to the waiting crowd and knows he has to act quickly.

He walks to the ledge and cranes his back to look underneath. "Nothing. There's nothing there, Bea."

***"The probability of that outcome was high."***

"Could he have stashed it anywhere else?"

***"Espan Lorenzo utilised the restroom for exactly three minutes and seventeen seconds. He occupied the first cubicle during this time."***

Danny presses the button - the toilet door slides open. He opens the first cubicle, bends down, checks underneath the toilet, and repeats the action in every booth. He runs his hands along the wall, between the cracks of every mirror, and underneath every sink.

*Nothing.*

**Accept Noah Levi video call.**

**Yes or No**

Danny rolls his eyes but swipes to answer.

"Danny, what is this about?" says Noah.

Danny puffs his cheeks while checking himself in the mirror, "False alarm, apparently."

"False alarm. About what? You're not making sense."

"Nevermind, Noah," Danny hangs up the phone, frustrated at Noah's flippant attitude towards his security. "Bea, has Esteban Lorenzo been anywhere else? I mean, where he might be able to get to Noah?"

***"Scanning his movement since he arrived in Supetar."***

Danny can hear raised voices from the bar, and he tuts at the stupidity of the whole thing. He needs more power; he can't work like this.

***"Esteban Lorenzo visited Noah Levis' modular last Sunday to deliver Adriana Levi her restrung tennis racquet.."***

"He's been inside Noah's modular?"

***"He was inside for precisely twenty-seven minutes; Noah wasn't there. He spoke with Adriana whilst drinking smoothies."***

"Bea, you're gonna have to start volunteering this type of information," he says whilst exiting the toilet.

***"I acknowledge the oversight, and I appreciate your guidance. With your assistance, I am learning to establish connections between past actions and their potential relevance to current situations. I will strive to adapt and learn quickly to improve my analysis capabilities."***

A Freedom Corp approaches Danny. "I am sorry, sir. Noah insisted..."

"... No doubt," says Danny as he eyes Noah, surrounded by a group of women enjoying the party..

Danny's frustration rises.

Noah turns to Danny as he walks past; he breaks off from the crowd and whispers, "What's this about, Danny? I don't appreciate being hung up on."

Danny turns back. He considered for a moment, releasing a volley of abuse about his inability to do his job, his dead son, grieving wife and a forever looming enemy on the horizon who always, until now, seemed to hover around the outskirts of Free World territory. Danny senses them silently observing, learning, and strategising, while he and his colleagues are handicapped by a leader who refuses to grasp or acknowledge the consequences of the world he created. But he decides against it; instead, he asks, "Where's Adriana? Is she coming down tonight?"

"No, she's at home. Why do you ask?" he replies, looking slightly concerned in reaction to Dannys' body language.

Danny doesn't reply. Instead, he walks to the boardwalk on the edge of the Phoenix Lounge and turns towards Founders Row - wondering how quickly it would take him to zoom there. He looks for the moped he arrived in, which is still resting in its charging port.

He turns back to the bar as the music blares out from the speakers. Suddenly, a monstrous explosion roars into the night sky! The ground shakes! The sky turns black! And Danny feels a tremendous thrust against his chest! He jolts backwards and lands on the sand.

# CHAPTER THIRTY

Danny Finn

A loud ringing invades Danny's ears and he struggles to open his eyes. A flashback to his army training reminds him to keep his mouth open when firing a gun to prevent injury from the shockwave. Pain throbs in his chest as he winces and covers his ears. Disoriented by scattered thoughts, he pinches the bridge of his nose. He desperately tries to remember why he's in zone six. Panic grips him as he lifts his head, searching for Noah amidst the smoke.

"Danny, can you hear me?"

An unfamiliar voice whispers Danny's name from the control room as his eardrums recover and process the sound vibrations.

"What happened?" Danny whispers. "Where's Noah?"

"There was a bomb, Danny. Try not to move; medical teams are on the way. Are you ok?"

"What about Noah? Where's Noah?"

"Bea said his vital signs are weak."

Undeterred, Danny moves towards the smoke, covering his mouth with his right hand as he lifts debris. He leans over and coughs violently - his heart sinking at the sight of the girls nearer the beach, covered in blood and black smoke, but relieved to see they are still alive. He yells to them, "Just stay put! Don't move. Help is on the way!"

Danny rushes towards the centre, where Noah is unconscious on the ground. He kneels and checks his pulse.

Desperate for help, Danny screams, "Is there a doctor anywhere?! Is there a doctor anywhere?!" His voice echoes through the chaos.

"Danny, medics will arrive very soon. Is he breathing?" The voice from the control room asks.

Danny suddenly recognises the voice. It's *Matias Jensen* - he volunteered to contribute some hours in the control room. "Barely," Danny replies. His heart sinks as he sees the people closest to the detonation point didn't survive. He checks their pulses, but it's clear they were too close to the blast to have survived..

One of the Freedom Corps didn't make it, whilst the other is making some sluggish movements. Danny shouts, "Just stay put, don't move. Help is on the way!"

He feels overwhelming anger at the senseless loss of life. He turns back to the lifeless bodies. He wants to scream.

*How dare they do this!*

*These young women were full of life just a few minutes ago - all not much older than Robbie.*

Their bodies acted as human shields blocking the blast path to Noah. The acceptance of his sons' death quickly washes away, rising with the smoke from the building.

The smoke thickens as the fire plane drops water on the flames, making breathing difficult. Danny coughs and then vomits, and then wipes his mouth. Finally, the medics arrive.

The medic checks Noah's pulse and screams, "Bea, we need an air medic now!"

The first emits a loud beeping as it lands directly on the boulevard adjacent to the now-smouldering building. Three more air medics are circling above, waiting for the first to vacate the area.



## **Accept Emily Finn video call?**

### **Yes or No**

“Matias, I’m on my way to the office now,” Danny hangs up the phone and accepts his wife’s video call - he’s zooming full speed on his scooter.

“What was that?” says Emily, gasping at Dannys’ smoke-charred face, “I’m coming to the office.”

“I’ll meet you there - it’s time for action.”

## Danny Finn

"Bea, what just went down is outrageous; we should've alerted someone. Widespread panic is a better option than risking lives or harm."

***"I agree, Danny."***

"Well, if you're on the same page, why didn't you let me give a heads-up? The Freedom Corps should've never let Noah Levi step out of that vehicle."

***"When analysing previous data..."***

"I don't give a fuck about previous data, Bea! I'm sick to death of your previous data!"

Danny considers walking into the office and ranting at Simon Craig. He pictures telling him how the privacy rules are handicapping his ability to do his job. He'd tell him how his own wife almost became a hostage because Bea couldn't inform Brendan and Zasha of her location.. He'd tell him how Bea knew that Esteban Lorenzo might have posed a security risk days ago, but she refused to allow Danny to warn anyone.

*We could have stopped this;* he rages to himself as he smacks the handlebars of his moped.

***"All I was going to say, Danny, is that this incident will force the USN to change their policy. When analysing the data from incidents throughout human history which brought forth major policy changes, this incident has all the traits of something that can do just that."***

"Fantastic! And all it took was the death of a human being."

***"Need I remind you that Noah Levi is not currently dead? However, having subsequently located Esteban Lorenzo, it seems he remotely detonated the bomb from a boat stationed in the Adriatic Sea. I doubt there is much that we could have done to stop this bomb from exploding. Some Freedom Corps are chasing him."***

Emily is waiting outside as Danny arrives at the Control Room. Danny could see that she wanted to inspect his face for injuries, but he walked right past with a nod to follow him inside.

"It was Esteban Lorenzo, boss," Matias says as Danny thunders through the door.

Simon's in his seat at the controls, concentrating intently. Across the far wall are six HoloLens views of Freedom Corps chasing Esteban Lorenzo.

"They've been chasing him across the sea and now on to the mainland - but he's got too big a head start," Matias says.

"Thanks for helping out, Matias. You're a good lad. Brendan told me you're after the fifth Imperial Guard position?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who is this guy?" Emily turns to Simon. "Esteban Lorenzo?"

"He's a tennis coach; that's all I know," says Matias.

"He came in on the Free World swap programme - he's only been here two weeks." Simon swipes a screen and brings up a picture of Esteban and his profile. "You're not gonna believe this, but he came from Brazil on a six-month swap. And he swapped with Robbie Finn."

"What!" Emily yells.

“Yep.”

Danny knows he needs to act surprised, but he’s never been that good at role-playing. Not to mention that he’s had more than enough mucking around. He’s angry with Bea and the whole setup of the USN. “I’m going to Brazil,” Danny snaps with serious intent.

“I’m coming with you,” Emily replies.

“You’re damn right you are,” Simon replies; he turns around. “You’re both going to Brazil.”

“I assume he was vetted?” asks Emily.

The focus is broken by Vanessa Hemp, entering the Imperial Guard office looking tense and tired. Emily embraces her, “Thanks, guys,” she puffs her cheeks. “He’s in a coma.”

Simon cuts in, “Vanessa, did you speak to this guy when he came to Supetar?”

“Yes, of course, that’s Esteban Lorenzo - tennis coach. He coaches Adriana. Why?”

“And you vetted him, like everyone else.”

“Yes, why?” she gasps and covers her mouth. “Don’t tell me.”

“The bomb was placed in position at about 5 pm today by Esteban Lorenzo.” Simon swipes another screen and displays the footage of Esteban. Simon is showing the same video that Danny saw earlier. “It took Bea three minutes to work out who did it, by which time Esteban was already halfway to the mainland.”

“I am shocked,” says Vanessa with tears in her eyes. She takes in the six HoloLens cameras across the far wall. “Simon, you can’t let the Freedom Corps chase Esteban onto the mainland. They’re out of jurisdiction.”

Clint Shanaghan storms through the door. “Danny, I’ve had enough of sitting around. We have to move.”

“Yes, we are, Clint; just calm down,” Danny turns to Simon. “We better recall Zasha; she can help Brendan find the hostages. I assume this means diplomacy failed.”

Simon gets Zasha on video call.

“Can we assume this is Andinho?” asks Emily.

“Who else could it be?” says Vanessa.

An incoming call to Imperial Guard headquarters makes the computer ring ominously. Simon swipes to answer.

To Dannels’ horror, he sees Andinho on the screen, standing in front of a large TV screen with a disturbing scene in the background. The screen shows Helio and his men taking to the streets with long flamethrowers, burning down the modulares and tech of the Free World, and forcing people from their homes and places of work.

Andinho smiles and gushes with a disturbing sense of satisfaction, clearly enjoying the unfolding chaos and destruction; he speaks with a smile. “I didn’t think that we would have the pleasure of Mr Levi’s wisdom this evening,” he says coldly, his voice dripping with malice.

“Well, you can wait if you like Andinho,” says Simon, “Noah’s enjoying a nice meal with his wife - and he wouldn’t consider stopping for the likes of you.”

“Huh, yes, I’m sure you would like to believe that,” he states coolly and calmly.

“What’s this about Andinho? I thought you had an agreement with Noah.”

Simon turns to another computer and enters Manaus’ location into the system. He enlarges the screen to show a birds-eye view of the ongoing genocide, trying to understand the situation on the ground better.

Andinho walks away from the TV footage and sits, his cold and calculating gaze fixed on Simon.

"I find it hard to believe that Mr Levi thought that he could just waltz into territory that has been in my family for generations, and we would just roll over."

Simon moves away from the screen; Danny thinks he's trying to antagonise the tyrant. He enlarges another screen - displaying Andinho's location. Andinhos' face creases in outrage as anger and arrogance drip from his bones - he speaks aggressively.

"And now you ignore me!" he barks.

Simon comes back to the screen and stares without saying anything.

"You dare ignore me? After all, I have shown you!" Andinho barks again.

"Andinho, you have just made the biggest mistake of your political career," Simon ends the call and swivels his chair around.

"Why did you do that, you stupid man!" Vanessa steps forward and slaps Simon around the face. "You've just antagonised him. Why did you do that?" she slaps him again.

"I don't care, Vanessa!" Simon snaps. "I want him to suffer; I want him to fear us. Look what he's done; it's time for action. And this is what we're going to do. We can't do anything about this carnage now, unfortunately. But we can use it to our advantage."

"Those arseholes," Vanessa sobs, "How dare they."

Simon points at the screen, "We've got locations of both of these tyrants. Helio is involved in the melee in Manaus - but that doesn't matter. We've got his location. You can creep up behind or sniper from afar, whatever you want. Andinho is in his estate in Sao Paulo. I suggest you split up and synchronise your killings; the minute you kill one, the other will start running. But let's get you airborne and plan more precisely when you're en route."

Simon pauses for breath and turns round to face the Imperial Guards. He speaks slowly through gritted teeth. "I know it's not what Noah would have wanted, but what is your definition of a bad man? Look! This is not an opinion; this is as close to a fact as can be - in anyone's language, these men must die."

"No doubt," Clint agrees.

"You're not coming," Danny says to Clint.

"What, Dan..."

"...Clint, don't argue! This ain't the moment! Both these ops demand split-second, covert timing. We need top-notch operatives, and you've barely been back in training for a week."

Simon cuts in, "Zasha, get to Brazil and find a safe spot and wait for the Imperial Guards," he ends the call and walks to the cabinet at the far left; he scans his eyes - the lock clicks open. "There's four of you and two of them. Take these real guns, with real bullets, and kill those sons of a bitches."

Danny turns to Vanessa - she eyes the guns with horror. She shuts her eyes, tears rolling down her left cheek - she begrudgingly nods permission and approval.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Danny Finn

The Imperial Guards exit the building, and Danny gestures for Clint to join him and Emily on the bench. Clint sits in the middle as Danny cups the muzzle of his rifle with both hands, His mind consumed by Robbie's final moments. He reaches for his chest and inhales sharply - his adrenaline masking the throb until now.

"Clint," the emotion bubbles in his stomach; he won't allow himself to release, so he turns his heart to stone. "You know I ain't tryna hold you back. I just wanna get this done."

"Yeah, but I can help, Danny. Robbie was like a brother to me, you know."

"Which is exactly why you can't go. I ain't ready to lose you too." He faces Clint, leaning in and clasping hands with Emily. "You're like a son to us, Clint. It's like you're Robbie's brother."

"That's true, Clint," says Emily. "We love you and don't want to lose you. You've been through enough. Let us go and get this done, and we'll be back before you know it."

Danny places his hand on Clint's shoulder with fatherly tenderness. "It's just the three of us, now, kid." He squeezes his shoulder and then turns to his wife. "And I'd also appreciate it if Em could understand why it's likely better if I handle this solo - so we don't have to be in harm's way. But I reckon that's asking a bit too much."

"No chance, Danny. You need me, and I'm not letting you do this alone."

They lean into a three-person embrace, seeking comfort and solace in each other's arms. But even as they hold each other tightly, Robbie's final moments replay in Danny's mind, intensifying his anger and grief. He allows it to fester.

The Imperial Guards dodge the commotion around the Central Gardens and the Medical Centre. They board a plane to Brazil, where Simon is already on a video call.

"Listen, guys, for the minute, until I say so - forget about the hostages," says Simon. "The primary targets are Helio and Andinho."

Danny and Emily turn to each other with a silent gaze.

"Got it?" says Simon forcefully.

"I'm not gonna argue with you," says Emily.

"But we are gonna get those hostages," says Danny.

"And we will," says Simon. "But let's deal with one thing at a time. If you release the hostages, finding Helio and Andinho will be impossible. We have to look at the bigger picture. We deal with Helio and Andinho - and then reconvene."

Simon ends the call as Emily leans into her husband - they link arms, "I was so relieved when you answered the phone, babe."

"Answered when?"

"After the blast."

Danny squirts a strained smile - relieved to see his wife's anger soften. "You're not gonna get rid of me that easily," he says with a lump in his throat. "I can't stop replaying it, Em, in my head, the moment of his death. When that asshole shot him, his head jerked sideways and the blood..."

"... Shh, babe, I know. I know. I saw it through your eyes. I'm sorry I haven't been there for you, babe. I'm so sorry."

He looks at her, but his mind is elsewhere - he doesn't see her. Danny sniffs and grits his teeth, "I'm gonna make him pay."

"Control your anger, Danny," Emily says softly. "You're a better fighter when your mind's clear. And we got a scared young man waiting for us to return. I don't want you taking any unnecessary risks."

Danny doesn't answer, "Bea, get Brendan on video."

***"Certainly, Danny, connecting to Brendan Baker."***

"Yeah, Danny."

"Brendan, what's the situation?"

"I'm on a roof on the outskirts of Manaus. There was no use speaking to anyone; the city's on a knife edge. I wanted to get higher to see what all the fuss was about. I thought maybe if I could get through the main square and out to where their vehicles began the journey, I could follow their tracks. But there was no chance." The camera pans to display a shocking scene of violence. "Perhaps a picture paints a thousand words."

Danny feels the grip of anger in his chest, letting it bubble after his heart-to-heart with Clint and Emily. He knows he can't drop into a war zone with a lump in his throat. Drawing on emotions in the aftermath of Robbie's death - anger, resentment and guilt. He hardens his heart, hoping to push through one last juggernaut to freedom. Whilst secretly accepting that this is, probably, just the beginning.

Brendan releases a drone to get a closer look at the violence. "It seems the Freedom Corps aren't just there to make up the numbers after all," he zooms closer.

"Danny," says Emily. "What is that?"

Danny leans in, "What the hell?"

"You know what, guys," says Brendan. "You're not gonna believe this. But some of this army look synthetic."

Horror grips the moment; Emily and Danny just stare at each other.

"Well, I can't make it out from this distance, but some of them look like they're moving funny - like not natural. And they seem to be stronger. Much stronger. Two - no wait. Maybe three - I can't tell because they look so human and wear the same uniform."

"Maybe Blair wasn't the only one," says Danny.

Emily nods her head but doesn't say anything.

"More to the point," says Danny. "Why has Dario sent them to Brazil?"

**GreenplanetX Defends The Free World! [Click here...](#)**

Live Broadcast  
Location: Studio

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## ***GreenplanetX Defends The Free World!***

*This footage is unsuitable for younger viewers.*

"The level of shock is indescribable as we view live scenes from Brazil this evening. What you're seeing are terrorists torching Brazilian Free World hubs. They're walking around with flamethrowers, ejecting people from their homes, and torching the buildings. They're burning everything to the ground. GreenplanetX has forwarded the footage to every news broadcaster in the Free World network. Here's what their leader, MrX, had to say."

"People of Manaus, do not fear. GreenplanetX will attack to defend."

"Most people, especially those living in the Free World, now accept that greed, corruption, and selfishness have ravaged our planet. It's a must for the sake of the earth and humanity that we work together and learn to share - in tandem with mother nature - just like we do in the Free World. It's clear, however, that there are still some people in this world that don't agree, there are still some people in this world that want to live in the profits - there are some people that will go to great lengths to stop The Free World from developing - prevent us from growing - even going as far as murder and genocide! Perhaps now is the time to stand up and fight for our freedom.

This is Maddison Nora reporting for the Free World News Network."

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Danny Finn

Danny and Emily prepare the propeller-powered paraglider for use, locking into the backpack and making sure everything is secure. The paraglider features two armrests with integrated remote controls, allowing the user to control the descent and direction for accurate landings

The paraglider is still in its prototype stage and doesn't have a large battery reserve. Brendan, the only Imperial Guard to have used the device, advised against frequent lateral or upward movements to conserve battery power.

Danny's heart pounds as his adrenaline spikes. He slows his breathing, focusing on learning to use the device while descending at one hundred and twenty miles per hour. Bea cannot control the new devices yet.

*Brendan also said you don't need to jump out of the plane head first as parachuters do.*

Danny pulls his goggles down, takes three deep breaths, and launches feet first out of the plane. The rush of wind and adrenaline surges through him as he presses and holds the red buttons at the end of each armrest, activating the propellers. The propellers take about five seconds to click in. Danny's instructions are to activate them at the same time that he would typically pull his chute out when using a parachute.

As the propellers engage, Danny feels a sudden burst of speed and acceleration, and he quickly adjusts his body position. The machine corrects his positioning as he drops through the air, and he feels exhilaration as he glides towards the ground. Brendan is on video call, offering guidance and support as Danny descends through the hot, sticky Brazilian air.

It's 1 am local time. Danny's dropping into virtual darkness, the smoke, fire and hellish screams bellowing from Manaus are lighting the way, creating an eerie atmosphere.

*It feels like I'm dropping into the depths of hell.*

The new propeller control system makes arriving at the precise location relatively seamless.

As he lowers towards ground level, he reaches for his binoculars. He can make out the words; 'Fuck The Free World' and 'Fuck Noah Levi' haphazardly spray painted on every city corner.

"Has anyone had eyes on this building?" asks Danny.

"We have boss," says Brendan. "And it seems like the ground assault is centred on Helio's location."

Danny lands with a thud, pressing a button to retract the device into position. Emily follows suit, and they quickly stow the new devices in the plane before grabbing the hover scooters.

"Ok, everyone, listen up," everyone falls silent as the captain of the Imperial Guard raises his voice. "We have a decision to make. We're about to break a vow we made to someone we all care about. Noah Levi is vital to hundreds of thousands of lives, and I don't take defying his orders lightly. Until we reach our targets, we still use the new guns. We are only authorised to kill two people: Helio and Andinho. Is that clear? But I think we should all decide for ourselves." Danny lifts some eye patches from his inside pocket. "I would advise you to do one of two things. Either remove your lens. Or use one of these eye patches."

"But, I thought we had authorisation," says Brendan. "Why do we need to sneak around?"



“We’ve been permitted by two emotionally charged, personal friends of the man lying in a coma. Bea has not allowed us. Now, it’s up to you, that’s why I said I’ll leave the decision in your hands. But if you ask me, it could open a can of worms that none of us needs - or deserves. I advise you to cover up.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Zasha Ivanov

Zasha reaches for an earpiece and sets it - she hands one to him in case they decide to withdraw their HoloLens,

"What's up, Brendan?" she asks, taking in his dark brown skin. "You're normally making jokes."

"Oh, it's nothing - I was just thinking about GreenplanetX. Their actions are unbelievable. But I don't get why they're protecting the Free World."

"It's more to do with Nacional Brazilia - this company is owned by Andinho."

"And the connection being ..."

"... GPX wants to infiltrate Nacional Brazilia so that they can provide free energy to Brazil. Andinho owns Nacional Brazilia. At the same time - Andinho is attempting to remove Free World residents by force from their homes."

"Doesn't it all seem just a bit convenient?"

"In which way?"

"Well, I hate to think it, but I've gotta ask, Zash. Do you think Noah Levi has anything to do with GPX?"

"I've thought about this. In normal circumstances, I'd say, without a doubt, he's part of GPX. But this Noah Levi," Zasha pauses to find the correct sentiment. "He seems different like he has made the ultimate sacrifice."

"I don't doubt that part. It's just that, GreenplanetX seems a bit convenient, don't you think? I listened closely once to recordings of MrX to see if I could find any trace of Noah."

"And?"

"He's not MrX," says Brendan as he withdraws a turquoise crystal gemstone, placing it on the table.

"What's this?"

"Oh," Brendan smirks, "I've been doing some work with a spiritual guru; he's been teaching me how to meditate, yoga, that kind of thing. I've never really given all that kind of stuff much thought, but he said it would help my anxiety. He said the gemstone would help to ground me into the present for the return journey home. I always find it difficult to relax after. And being in a plane, sometimes I could just tear my hair out - if I had any, that is."

"And, does it help with your anxiety?"

He shrugs, "Dunno, I think so - I suppose we'll see."

"I suffer with this anxiety; I know how this feels."

"Yeah, I think it started when I was young. Until the age of ten, I grew up in an orphanage. I was about to move to a foster home when the satellites disappeared. It meant I couldn't leave the orphanage. But soon after it lost its funding anyway, all the kids were left to fend for themselves. I had no option other than to enlist with the military as soon as I was old enough."

Zasha nods awkwardly, seemingly at a loss for words. Brendan breaks the silence, "So what about you? Why do you suffer from anxiety?"

Zasha hesitates as her discomfort grows, racking her memory banks in search of a concrete reason to put her finger on.

"Maybe it was because the Russian Government recruited me at fifteen years old, built into a machine and used continuously by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. Doing nothing but going from job to job - country to country - for the past fifteen years!"

"Zasha, I just wanna say; you've been an absolute mench over the past coupla weeks. If you ask me, you deserve an extended break. You must have loads saved up, have you asked Bea?"

"She gives me regular updates. So how come you came to the Free World?"

Brendan pauses and looks to the ground - Zasha can feel his hesitation. "Well, they instructed me to say that I was headhunted."

The statement piques Zasha's interest, "Why were you told to say this?"

"Because I wasn't headhunted."

"So, how did you arrive."

He gulps in some air, "I was representing Britain - part of the United Nations army fighting Russia. Stationed in Poland."

"And?"

"And, that's it. I got separated from my unit - found myself in the Free World."

"That doesn't sound like that's it!" Zasha says.

"Just drop it, Zash."

"They told me to say I was headhunted, too."

"Really, ha! Those sneaky so and so's! But hundreds of people saw you arrive from the Zincods ship?"

"I know this. Vanessa and Noah said that it was important that if anyone asks, I tell them I was headhunted, like everyone else."

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Danny Finn

Danny leads the way, with Emily hovering close behind, effortlessly navigating over obstacles on the ground. With the help of a map prepared by Brendan, Danny directs Emily through the areas of town that Brendan and Zasha got caught up in a few days earlier. Despite the looming fear of what they will find at their destination, Danny feels the journey is over in a flash.

They disembark from their scooters and let them retract into position before climbing up a building on the outskirts of town. Danny takes out his retractable one-eye binoculars while Emily produces a device with hooks on the end.

"Helio's rooftop has two soldiers posted by the hatch," Danny reported, then turned his attention to the device Emily was using.

"Zasha just gave it to me," says Emily. "You clip it to one side of a roof," it locks into place, "and then you press this button," the ladder automatically unwinds - it clips onto the other side and then locks into place.

The Imperial Guards walk seamlessly between rooftops. Masked by the fighting on the ground.

*It's open warfare.*

The Freedom Corps countered the soldiers with an attack. But the situation spirals into chaos as Helio's men, posing as Freedom Corps members, jump into the chaos. Some members of GreenplanetX are also dressed in military attire similar to Helio's group. This further confuses the situation, making it challenging to discern friend from foe.

*It looks like the robots are fighting with GPX against Helio.*

As they creep around the corner keeping their heads low, their bodies pressed against the wall. They are now only about one hundred feet away from Helio's location. Danny's anxiety peaks, and he can almost sense Helio's fear as they draw closer.

*He can feel us closing in on him.*

Danny stops, crouched down, back against the wall. "Have you just seen what I've seen?" Danny asks Emily.

"Blair?"

"Yeah, it looks like GPX human soldiers are all travelling with one of those Blairs. I saw at least three or four small groups all scattered around one of those things."

"How the hell are we gonna get in?"

Danny surveys the area, searching for a secure location where his wife can take cover and watch his back while he carries out his mission. "If you make it to that rooftop over there," he points to the left. "You can see both guards from there and set up the sniper. Once you're ready, let me know."

He and Emily meet each other's gaze before leaning in for a kiss, holding the embrace for a moment. "And Em, keep your head down, okay?" he adds before they part.

Emily rises to her feet and almost bumps straight into a man holding an Uzi submachine gun. She reacts quickly by right jabbing him in his face; blood splurts from his nose - he stumbles backwards, waving his weapon haphazardly. Suddenly, a shot rings out as the man squeezes the trigger. Emily falls to the ground.

"Emily!" Danny screams, lunging forward, using his left leg to leap from the ground. He performs a flying right roundhouse kick, which connects solidly with the tyrant's face. As the man collapses, another shot echoes - the bullet enters the man's skull and exits the other side.

Danny instinctively throws his body down - covering his wife.

She whispers, "Danny, I'm ok," she winces and grits her teeth. "I think he just grazed me."

Danny turns around, keeping his head low, withdraws his binoculars and scans the vicinity. The only person he can see who might have taken that shot is a Blair robot standing on a rooftop directly across from Helio's hatch on the other side of the street. He keeps the information to himself and turns back to his wife.

"I can't believe they got me," she whispers.

"Show me."

She brings her left hand up, bleeding on its left side.

Danny wipes the blood and confirms it's just a graze, breathing a sigh of relief. "Just stay calm," he says, withdrawing a bandage from his inside pocket.

"Danny," Emily says.

He ignores her.

"Danny. Danny, look at me."

He looks up and meets her eye.

"I'm sorry about blaming you, babe; it was an awful thing to say; I was just angry. You know I don't blame you, don't you?"

Despite his relief to have his wife by his side once more, he refuses to let his heart glow. *Not now.* He directs his focus back to the bandage.

"And I also don't believe Noah and Dario Keller are dictators. I was just angry, Danny. I hope you can understand that."

Danny listens to her words, but he doesn't reply. Instead, he thinks of Robbie getting shot in the head by Helio Ciao.

"Danny, look at me."

He doesn't look at her.

"Danny, look at me."

He does this time; he catches her eye - feels her love, and recognises her fear. And then he thinks of Robbie getting shot in the head by Helio Ciao.

"I want you in and out of there as quickly as possible. Do you understand me?"

He looks back down and continues the surgery.

"Do you remember where we first met?" he asks.

"Of course, Babe. You were a fresh-faced, tough upstart in your first week at military training in Washington. So confident in your martial arts that you decided to spar with the captain. You ended up in my hospital for a week."

Danny chuckles, "Talk about a role reversal." He swallows the lump in his throat, refusing to allow his emotions to overwhelm him.

"Danny, I meant what I just said. I want you in and out and for us to be out of this hell hole - and back home as quickly as possible. Do you understand me?"

Danny grits his teeth as the image of Robbie's death continues to plague his subconscious. "He has to pay for his crimes, Em."

“And he will; you’re about to make sure of that. But I just want you to know I was wrong for making you feel like Robbie’s death was your fault. And I apologise. I’m sorry I blamed you - and I’m sorry if I made you feel like I was demanding retribution.” She winces again as he tightens the bandage, almost as payback for abandoning him during one of the most challenging weeks of his life. “Even if it did feel like I wanted revenge for a while,” Emily Continues, “but I was wrong, Danny. I shouldn’t have made you feel that way. We’re not GPX, and we have to protect the integrity of the Free World. I know you know that better than anyone.”

“Ok, done,” Danny says, changing the subject.

Emily stretches her hand.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Ready."

Danny grabs his binoculars; he scans the area to cover her tracks as Emily creeps back the way they came. Meanwhile, Danny continues to monitor the vicinity, the sound of gunshots and screaming men filling the air. The energy in the air triggered his brutal nature. He thinks of Robbie getting shot in the head by Helio Ciao. Helio's face is etched into his cerebral cortex. He cups his head in his hands and fixes his eyes shut.

*I'm going to kill him - that asshole will die today.*

Danny scans the area again - two soldiers guarding the hatch are shooting at the Blair robot from across the street, but their bullets bounce away harmlessly.

"Ready, babe," says Emily.

## **Zasha Ivanov**

### **Accept Simon Craig video call?**

#### **Yes or No**

Zasha swipes to answer.

"You're gonna be landing on Andinho's runway," says Simon

"What!" says Brendan.

"There's little option, Brendan. His estate is pretty much built into the forest. His runway's also purpose-built. The only other option is an airport thirty miles away."

"Shit, well, that could blow up in our faces before we even get off the ground."

"We will circle the area before landing," says Zasha.

"Exactly, you'll do your due diligence," says Simon. "I've checked the heat map, and there doesn't seem to be any heat signatures coming from that location. I can't see any reason why there would be. Who wants to man a runway that's only in use by one person? Especially at two in the morning."

Simon flicks his wrist to send the Imperial Guards the heat map. "Andinho, at the moment, seems to be in the room at the top of this mansion - but he's been moving about a little. The other signatures are soldiers guarding their post."

"This place is surrounded by forest for miles," says Zasha.

"Will help with the getaway," says Brendan.

Zasha attempts to mentally prepare herself for another life-or-death mission, the kind she thought she had left behind after three years of peace in Supetar. She tries to push thoughts of the utopian city out of her mind. But she can't stop thinking about Danny Finn and his patience and empathy. And Robbie Finn, young and innocent. These moments with her new friends she's come to cherish. She wants to experience them again. The memory of Robbie Finn keeps her anger simmering.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Danny Finn

Danny moves stealthily, keeping his back against the wall as he traverses the rooftops towards his destination, now approaching the neighbouring building. He silently withdraws his firearm. He takes out the soldiers with expert precision, freezing them with just a few well-placed shots before they can turn around.

Danny extends the ladders and calmly crosses the rooftop. He gazes at the Blair robot, and for a moment, he thinks Blair smiled at him. A strange shimmering reverberates to the robot's right side.

"Danny, I just shot that Blair in the head. The new guns don't work on him."

"Hold fire, Em. He doesn't seem bothered by my presence."

Danny looks away, locates the hatch and heaves it towards him. He sets a bomb to detonate in two seconds, rolls it into the room below, and closes the hatch.

*I hope that bomb doesn't take out Helio.*

He opens the hatch, drops down, surveys the frozen bodies and shoves them aside.

*Helio's not here.*

Danny hears soft footsteps, getting louder as they approach rapidly - he quickly positions himself behind the door, waiting for it to swing open. As it does, he catches a glimpse of the first two people to enter the room, neither of whom is Helio. One of them shouts something in Portuguese to someone outside, and then Helio himself walks in.

Danny cups his firearm in his left hand, with his new gun at the ready in his right. He kicks the door shut and readies his left leg, aiming for Helio's fibula. With a swift and forceful blow, he snaps the limb almost in half, relishing the satisfaction it brings. Before Helio can scream, Danny aims and shoots the soldiers, freezing them in place. He then holsters his new gun and aims at Helio's head.

And there he stands, alone in a room with the man that killed his son. The tension rises. Danny looks intently at Helio, his injured leg causing him to limp. He's wearing traditional green combat trousers and a black tank top - his Uzi submachine gun swings menacingly over his left shoulder, but his defeated posture suggests that he knows the game is up. Helio moans and cowers, dripping with sweat as he chuckles with acceptance.

"You think this is the end, my friend?" Helio grits his teeth and winces, "You think killing me will make any difference." He growls, spits blood and chuckles louder, "Your GreenplanetX has upset many powerful people! This is just the beginning!"

Danny advances slowly, his body rigid with rage. "GreenplanetX?" he asks incredulously as he pulls Helio's hair back and pins him against the wall. Danny inches his face closer to Helio's, the tip of his nose grazing Helio's cheek. "You don't even know who I am, do you?" he demands, his voice seething with contempt. As Danny says the words, a flash of recognition seeps into Helio's eyes. But before he can speak, Danny thrusts his forehead into Helio's nose.

Danny releases his hair and disarms Helio of his Uzi, casting it on the floor. He frisks him for other weapons and tosses them down. Finally, he stands Helio upright, gripping him firmly in position.



Danny holsters his weapon, turns his back, and locks the door to ensure privacy. He then front-kicks Helio in the chest, but Helio responds with a right hook that connects with Danny's cheek. Undeterred, Helio tries the same move again, but Danny catches his arm and twists it back. He then delivers a series of right hooks to Helio's face, causing him to fall. Danny catches and pushes him upright again, pinning him against the wall.

Danny launches another front kick, but this time Helio blocks it and attempts a left swing. Danny narrowly avoids the blow and responds with a flying right roundhouse that lands squarely on Helio's left cheek, causing him to fall again. But Danny lunges forward, catches and pushes him upright, pinning him against the wall again.

Danny unleashes a barrage of punches, repeated left and right hooks into Helio's midriff. Helio spits blood, which Danny skillfully dodges. Helio attempts a tired right hook, but Danny catches his arm and snaps it back with a sickening crunch, breaking it. Helio screams in pain and falls to the ground, begging for mercy. But Danny refuses to let up. He leans forward, picks him up and pushes him upright against the wall.

Danny unleashes a series of left and right hooks into Helio's face, causing his eyes to glaze over. Danny then headbutts him, screaming in rage as he grabs his face in both hands. "That's for my son," he whispers. "Who you murdered in front of my eyes." Danny lands another devastating right hook, sending Helio crashing to the ground. Helio's eyes are flickering.

Danny lifts him and pins him against the wall. For a split second, he thought he might be feeling sorry for him. Danny withdraws his firearm while pushing the thought to the back of his mind. He aims at Helio's head - Danny knows what he must do – justice must be served.

"DANNY! No!" Emily's voice rings out as she drops down the hatch and puts herself between Danny and Helio. "I will not let you kill this man in cold blood."

"Em, what the hell are you doing?" He pushes her - she resists.

"No, I won't let you do it."

"What the fuck are you doing? You shouldn't have left your post; we're exposed."

She slaps him.

The snap shocks him - he pauses and breathes.

"I don't care, Danny. I will not let you throw away our future for this man! I will not let you ruin everything."

"I'm not ruining everything ..."

"... You will if you pull that trigger. We are not GreenplanetX. You are the captain of the Imperial Guard, and we operate from a different rule book. And I will not let you chuck all that away for this fool."

Images of Robbie playing in the back garden when he was younger softens his steaming anger - a lump forms in his throat.

She cups his face, "And killing Helio won't work, baby. It won't bring him back."

Tears of anger pour down Danny's cheeks. He grits his teeth and sniffs.

"He's gone," says Emily, her eyes watering as she looks into Danny's eyes. "It's enough now; let's go home." Emily turns to Helio - he's panting heavily, blood pouring from numerous places with broken bones. She emits a wry smile. "Look at him. He's not worth it. It's enough now."

"But what do you want me to do? I mean, we discussed this - he can't live..."

"... I want you to be the man everyone knows you are. The man I know you are, the man I fell in love with. I want you to take your HoloLens out - put Bea in - and arrest this man."

Despite his urge for one more fatal blow, Danny hesitates, reaches into his pocket, and inserts his HoloLens.

Emily grabs a nearby chair and uses it to climb onto the roof. Meanwhile, Danny hoists Helio onto his back. When Emily reaches the rooftop, she assists Danny in lifting Helio. Emily grapples with the weight as Helio collapses beside the rooftop hatch. As Danny pulls himself up, a panicked man shouts in broken English.

"Put down your weapons, or I will kill her!" He's wrapped his arm around Emily's neck - his gun is pointing at Emily's head.

Danny's heart starts pounding in his chest as he extends his arms and speaks slowly - placing his gun on the floor, he pleads with the man. "Now, just hold on there, bro; you don't wanna be doing anything stupid."

The soldier looks down at Helio, lifeless and barely breathing on the floor.

"Just put the gun down. You don't wanna be doing anything stupid," Danny repeats.

The soldier waves his gun hysterically, "No, no, no, what have you done," he screeches with anguish, "What have you done? You killed him."

"I haven't killed him," Danny pleads, feeling hysterical but holding it together, "He's still alive; you can take him if you like. You can take me also. Just let the lady go."

"Fuck that, Danny!" Emily squeals, "Just shoot him, don't worry about me."

The panicked man aims the gun at his own head, then back at Danny, and then at Emily. "Noooo, you must pay!" he squeals with grief.

Suddenly, Danny sees a Blair robot heave itself up from the ground below. Without hesitation, the robot shoots the panicked man holding Emily in the back of the head - he lands with a thud. Danny releases a breath, his heart rate slowing for just a second as he and Emily both withdraw their firearms, ready to defend themselves. They point their guns at Blair.

"I apologise for any alarm I may have caused Danny and Emily," says Blair in a calm cultured English accent, "It was not my intention." The robot turns to Helio - aims - and shoots once, twice, thrice in Helio's head.

"No!" Emily squeals. But she's too late,

Danny watches in stunned silence as Helio take his last breath.

"According to our internal data, Helio Ciao is classified as extremely dangerous," says Blair. "He poses a significant security risk to the Free World and must be removed."

"We were trying to detain him," says Emily. "And what business do you have speaking of the Free World?"

"Helio Ciao is classified as extremely dangerous; he poses a significant security risk to the Free World. Free World residents are our friends."

Danny suddenly feels safe in the robots company. He withdraws his telescope and scans the vicinity, "Do you know where the hostages are?" Danny asks.

"Accessing," he says, and after a moment, he confirms. "Yes, GreenplanetX has located the hostages."

Danny breathes in sharply, "What, you've found them? Or you've already rescued them?"

"Accessing. GreenplanetX has located the hostages and is preparing to mount a rescue mission."

"Attempt."

"Please repeat."

“Rescue attempt, you’ll make a rescue attempt. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you were trying to gain access into one building to kill one man - for how long? Until we came along. That’s why you were watching, wasn’t it?”

“Our instructions were to stand back and allow Danny Finn access to Helio Ciao.”

Danny double-takes, “Instructions from who?”

“Accessing,” he says, and after a moment, he confirms. “I do not have access to that information right now.”

“And why did you kill him now?” asks Emily, “When you saw we had him under control.”

“Helio Ciao is classified as extremely dangerous; he poses a significant security risk to the Free World and must be removed.”

Danny turns around and eyes Helio Ciao one last time. “Bea, take a picture and send it to Zasha Ivanov.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

## Zasha Ivanov

Zasha and Brendan walk to the cockpit and release the automatic pilot. Zasha squints into the distance, her gaze fixed on a small clearing in the trees. She can see a large mansion, its imposing form grazing the skyline.

"That's it," she says.

They circle the runway and detect no sign of life. She can see a parked plane at the end of the runway. They check the heat map. "I think we're safe," says Zasha as she releases the landing gear and sets the landing sequence in motion. As they descend, Zasha switches the lights off.

They land in almost complete darkness—despite Brendan's protest. A new feature of the aircraft allows you to set the landing sequence in motion and use the advanced artificial intelligence system to finish the landing. Zasha maintains her composure as the plane descends, marvelling at the cutting-edge technology, while Brendan fidgets and twitches with anxiety.

They exit the plane quickly and take cover in nearby trees, remaining vigilant as they await signs of danger. As they settle in, Zasha cranes her neck to admire the half-moon glowing in the night sky. Despite the tension of their mission, she can't help but marvel at the beauty of the natural world. She allows herself to imagine a moment when she can again enjoy such moments in a more peaceful setting.

"So why did you come to the Free World then if it wasn't by design?"

The question interrupts her nightdream. "Oh, just forget it. Keep your mind on the job." Distant voices in the forest grab their attention; they listen as Zasha brings up the heatmap.

"Two heat signatures coming this way. We have to intercept them before they see the plane. And Brendan."

"Yes, Zash."

"Once we freeze them, the clock starts ticking. We'll have about ten minutes before they alert Andinho. We need to move fast."

Zasha rises to her feet, aims, and shoots twice with Imperial Guard precision.

They board their hover scooters and weave through the trees. The hum of the machines echoes through the forest.

As they approach the tree house they observed from the satellite, they stash their hover scooters as Brendan climbs the stairs. It's a tall tree house. This is the first bit of good news today. Zasha makes her way on foot to the edge of the forest. She stops to bring up Simon's images of the security system.

"Ready when you are, Zasha," says Brendan.

Zasha darts to the perimeter of the building and signals Brendan. He snipes the guard at the top of the stairs. She races up the stairs and shoots the next guard coming out the door. She moves the guard aside and enters the building.

"Zasha, you're not gonna believe this, but I've got a clear shot on Andinho." Zasha peeks around the corner; the guard on the next landing is dozing, unaware of the Imperial Guards. She sneaks out and speaks in hushed tones. "So why haven't you finished this?"

"I'm just checking the heat map. There are two signatures in that room now; I can't see the second one; Andinho is pacing."

"So, take the shot."

"What about you, though? The minute this bullet enters his skull, his soldiers will be on the warpath; you won't have much time to exit."

"I will deal with this—just take the fucking shot." Zasha's heart races as she waits with bated breath for Brendan to take the shot. Time seems to stand still as she watches the frozen guards, her mind racing with the weight of the mission, picturing Robbie Finn, Danny Finn, and Emily Finn. Guilt tears at her soul

as she remembers chasing Samar Behi through the streets of Washington when she should have been helping and protecting him. She recalls the image of Helio Ciao lying dead on a rooftop in Manaus. The memory softens her anger and heightens her satisfaction.

Then she thinks of Supetar, St Helena, Mont Lubin, and Gotska Sandon, all the utopian Free World hubs she's traveled to in service of the Free World. As she surveys the area, she notices other guards strolling past, unaware of their presence.

"This must end today," she whispers to herself. "Otherwise, it will be me who has to come back (again) and clear up the mess." She withdraws her eye patch and places it over her eye. She holsters the new device and withdraws her firearm.

Suddenly, Brendan's single shot punctures the night sky. Birds squawk—soldiers shout aggressively in Portuguese—and the guard previously dozing is running down the stairs. Zasha attaches a silencer and cocks her handgun as she waits for the sleepy soldier. She shoots him in the head as he exits the building, blood splattering the door behind.

"What the fuck was that, Zasha? We're only authorized to kill Andinho. Who are you shooting at?" Zasha ignores the inquiry as her heart races. She hears another guard coming down the stairs—she springs into action, grabbing his rifle and shoving it into his nose—he drops to the floor. She steps on his nose as she walks past. She grabs his head and slams it into the floor. The impact cracks his head open, and blood drips down the staircase. She whispers, "Stay in position, Brendan, and cover me."

"What? We've done the job, Zasha. We should leave."

Brendan's cowardice frustrates her. "Just do what I say. I want to make sure this was Andinho." "One more guard is coming your way."

Zasha holsters her device, grabs the soldier's neck, and twists it, dropping him silently to the floor. "There's one more signature inside Andinho's room; I have no idea who it is; I haven't got eyes on him." As Zasha reaches the top of the staircase, she pauses to catch her breath. With her firearm at the ready, she twists the door handle and pushes the door open, revealing a silent and seemingly empty room.

As she steps inside, she sees a man sitting in a chair in the corner, his hands and feet tied up. She recognizes the man. In front of him, she sees Andinho's lifeless body on the floor, with a bullet hole in his head.

"It's Joao Carlos; I'm untying him."

"Zasha, there are six or seven guards coming your way. I'll do my best to cover you."

Zasha cuts Joao Carlos's restraints and lifts him. "Can you walk?"

"Barely," he speaks with a cracked voice. "Thank you for this, but you shouldn't put yourself at risk for me," he puts his arm around Zasha's neck for stability. They walk down the stairs. "Have you found the other hostages?"

"This is not your concern now. And we did not risk life and limb to save you. We came for Andinho." "You came to kill him?"

Zasha remains focused on the mission, ignoring the inquiry as they descend the stairs. Another soldier catches her off guard as they round the corner, frozen in place by Brendan's sharpshooting. With her firearm ready, Zasha quickly dispatches the soldier with a single shot to the head. She can feel Joao Carlos's stare but brushes it off.

As they continue to make their way through the building, they encounter another frozen soldier on the next staircase, but this time Zasha is prepared and quickly dispatches him. They soon reach the dead soldiers on the first landing, and Zasha grabs one of the rifles to add to her arsenal.

As they move down the staircase, Zasha nearly slips on the blood flowing down the stairs but keeps her footing.

Zasha exits the building and takes out the first soldier, frozen at the top of the stairs leading down to the garden. But as another shot rings out, Joao Carlos winces in pain, and they quickly duck behind a nearby wall for cover.

Zasha checks Joao Carlos—he's wounded, his arm bleeding from a gunshot wound in his shoulder. "Just leave me," he says. "Save yourself."

"I'm not leaving you, Mr. Secretary," she says, lifting her finger to her ear. "Brendan, what's the situation?"

"You're surrounded, Zasha. I'm picking them off."

Zasha lifts her eye patch to bring up the heat map, assessing the enemy's position and estimating their movements. With four signatures popping up on the screen, she quickly estimates their location and prepares to take action. As two soldiers creep around in the shadows, Zasha spots them and aims her rifle through a small hole in the wall. She fires two shots with deadly precision—both soldiers drop to the floor.

"Okay, that's it, Zasha. I'm making my way to the runway."

Zasha rises to her feet. "Get the hover scooters and meet me here."

"Affirmative."

Zasha walks down the stairs, leaving the secretary behind as she approaches the frozen soldiers Brendan shot. She dispatches the first soldier with a shot to the head, point blank, just as Brendan emerges from the trees hovering on his scooter. He looks shocked and slightly scared.

"Zasha, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Don't question me. You are not the one who keeps being shoehorned into enemy territory."

"But..."

"No buts, this ends tonight! I am not risking one of these guys taking Andinho's place. We could be back here next week with the same problem. If they want to imprison me, chuck me out of the Free World, just for doing my job—then fine—if this is how it must be, then so be it. But we have an opportunity to end this today, and I am damned if I will miss this opportunity. If they send us to war, then war is what they will get."

She approaches the next frozen soldier and shoots him in the head, then repeats the action with the following soldier. Brendan Baker withdraws his new gun and shoots Zasha in the chest.

The shock makes her pause. She tries to react, but her frozen limbs stick to the floor.

"Sorry," says Brendan. "I hear what you're saying, and I agree with you. But this is getting out of hand."

Her anger flares. The fire inside wants to rage, but it can't. *I will hurt Brendan Baker.*

She watches silently as Brendan grabs the secretary and transports him to the plane. She directs her energy to her right leg and uses all her strength to break through the invisible shackles but only succeeds in making her leg throb. She starts to panic; she's exposed and can't see behind her. Brendan is so stupid.

Zasha feels relief when Brendan returns in a rush. He looks breathless but moves in slow motion; he's holding a piece of cloth cut loose from the now defunct, outdated onboard parachute.

*He's smiling.*

*He makes fun.*

*He should wipe that smile off his face.*

"I'll try and make this as painless as possible, Zasha, okay?" He waits for an answer and then proceeds without one.

*He's sporting a stupid smirk on his stupid face.*

Using the cloth as a makeshift hammock, he gently caresses Zasha onto the hoverboard. As they ascend, Zasha takes in the mansion and the scattered bodies that fell prey to her rage. She's unable to access feelings of remorse with so much pent-up rage ready to explode. Simon's trying to communicate, but his words come through in a low pitch agonising groan. Her anger simmers as

Brendan drags Zasha into the plane. Her Achilles ache as they bump against each step leading up. Brendan grabs some gaffa tape and straps Zasha against the toilet door, holding her in place.

“That should keep you secure for takeoff,” he whispers. “I’ll sort something more permanent when we’re in the air.”

She wants to tell Simon to STOP. PLEASE STOP!

His attempts to communicate are like an endless void of low-pitch muffles. Zasha wants to cover her ears but can’t. The low muffled vibrations directed into her skull are warping her reality. Her head starts to spin. She wants to cup her head—but can’t. She feels like she might be sick but can’t imagine how that would manifest.

The plane rises skywards. Brendan leaves the cockpit. He loosens her restraints and scans the vicinity for something more comfortable. He grabs some cushions and places them behind Zasha’s back.

*It helps.*

She wants to tell him to take her HoloLens out. She tries to signal by moving her eyes. Brendan just creases his forehead, moves to the kitchen and returns with a glass of water. He tries to pour the liquid into her mouth, which falls back out again. He shrugs his shoulders and takes a seat. Thankfully not right in front of Zasha. She might explode with rage if forced to look at him for the rest of the journey.

Simon ceases his attempts to communicate, giving Zasha a chance to accept her temporary situation. Brendan’s fumbled attempt at empathy softens her anger. She closes her eyes and attempts to meditate or fall asleep, standing up while trying not to think about how long two hours will feel to her. She’s chosen to assume that Brendan used the lowest setting.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Noah Levi

Noah wakes early Monday morning, less than forty-eight hours after the blast that left him in a coma. He watches Adriana sleeping on a chair next to his bed, a lump forms in his throat - the eerie quiet pulling on his heartstrings.

Looking through the sliding French bay windows, Noah appreciates the immaculately maintained gardens. Still, his mind is stuck, replaying the last conscious memories he has access to - the overpowering heat, the blast, the blood and screaming, followed by blackness.

*The girls, what happened to the girls?*

Noah pulls at the wires attached to his chest, rises to his feet and places a robe over his hospital clothes. He slips his bare feet into some slippers and slides open the French doors. The sharp smell of freshly cut grass is grounding.

"Bea," his voice cracks. "Bea, can you tell me what happened to the girls involved in the blast?"

***"In Zone Six, there have been unfortunate casualties involving five individuals: one member of the Freedom Corps and four female residents."***

"Oh my god," he whispers.

***"Four members of the Freedom Corps and four female residents managed to survive the incident, albeit with various injuries including cuts, bruises, fractures, and concussions."***

A sudden jolt of pain courses through his back, and he instinctively reaches behind to touch the lingering burn scars on the back of his neck. The memory of the explosion replays in his mind, causing him to cradle his head in his hand.

*More people died because of me.*

"I'm going to see Arthur Bernard, the pot maker and the fountain," he thinks absently. "I haven't been to the fountain in a long time."

Noah sets out on the scenic shortcut through the crops to the other side of the island. The monotony of the trek gives him time to recall the events leading up to the blast.

*The girls paid the price for trying to get close to me.*

He steps on something sharp and winces. He inspects the bottom of his slippers.

*Yep, that's me, a walking accident.*

*I should never have started this Free World.*

*Robbie Finn is dead.*

*Oh, those poor girls, those poor girls.*

"And Olivia and Vanessa," he thinks out loud.

*Too many, too much.*

He recalls the first time he saw Vanessa, with two neatly covered black eyes following the kidnapping. A lump forms in his throat; he wants to cry but can't. He's hardly had any liquids in forty-eight hours, and his mouth is dry.



*She's so strong. I can't believe how quickly she got the smile back on her face. Much stronger than me.*

Noah walks to the island's quiet and secluded northeast side. This area is predominantly inhabited by the elderly, who prefer the peacefulness and solitude of the location. Sometimes it can get eerily quiet, which is why Noah comes this way to meditate in the area. It's also why Noah suggested erecting a manufactured fountain - to break the peace with water trickles.

Today, Noah makes a beeline for this fountain. He wets his mouth from the drip and sits, watching Arthur Bernard, a sixty-two-year-old pot maker born in Saint-Etienne, France.

Noah watches as Arthur Bernard works on his latest creation, a garden pot with intricate designs and delicate details. He knows that Arthur is more than just a pot maker - he's a symbol of the Free World and everything it stands for. Arthur works with pride and passion, dedicating his days to serving the community with his pots and pans. He has a focus and determination, and Noah feels a sense of admiration and vindication as he sits here watching the infamous pot maker.

As Arthur finishes his latest creation, he places it in his garden for someone to take. Occasionally, Bea will tell you that this one, or that one, is reserved. But for the most part, residents are free to take the pots and pans as they please. Witnessing the joy and passion Arthur Bernard has for his craft makes Noah's heart sing. Despite all the tragedies and injustices over the past weeks, Noah feels gratified that people like Arthur Bernard are still thriving in a Free World.

*That's all I wanted: a way for the world to follow their dreams without fear of repercussions.*

As Noah continues to watch him at work, he notices a young couple who've come to inspect the pot maker's famous creations. Noah sighs deeply at the sight of the couple's joy and excitement. He watches as they spend several minutes examining the pots and pans, carefully scrutinising each option before making a choice. As they wave goodbye to Arthur and thank him for his work, the pot maker grunts a goodbye in return. He's sitting in his front yard with the sun beating down on his naked chest, enjoying his happy place and creating another masterpiece.

For Noah, it's a small but powerful reminder of the hope and possibility that still exists in the Free World, even in the darkest of times. Despite their challenges and hardships, people continue to find joy and meaning in their lives, creating beauty and sharing it with others.

*Arthur Bernard demands no thanks; he needs no encouragement; he's self-motivated - his pleasure comes from working and providing a service.*

*That's all I wanted.*

*Those poor girls.*

*Robbie Finn.*

*Poor Olivia. It's all my fault.*

Noah's lost in his thoughts. He's lost track of time and isn't sure how long he's been wiling away the hours watching Arthur Bernard on his favourite fountain.

When he lifts his head, he recognises two women strolling down the hill, almost in line with Arthur Bernard's modular.

Noah follows their footsteps right up to the fountain, then tries his best to smile.

"Hello dear, have you been searching for me? Probably, well, I suppose that's just me, isn't it? Only ever thinking about myself."

Vanessa settles onto the bench to Noah's left while Adriana sits on her husband's knee. Adriana's natural scent envelops Noah's senses, her tender touch radiating warmth and affection for Noah to suckle on. The release becomes hysterical as the barricades crumble dramatically.

"This was all I wanted, for everyone to be free. You don't blame me for everyone's death, do you?"

"Why, of cour..."

"...Arthur Bernard doesn't need our thanks; he works because he wants to, he enjoys his days and all of Supetar profits from it. This was all it was supposed to be, simple, really."

"Noah..."

"...Do you blame me for everyone's death, Vanessa?"

"Please, Noa..."

"...You see, look at him," Noah waits for them to turn their heads towards the pot maker. "Look at him, you see - look - it's perfect. Isn't it? He works because he wants to, and everyone profits from it."

Adriana wipes her husband's nose and eyes.

"But I'm probably being selfish, Vanessa, wanting everyone to be free? Maybe they don't want to be free, and now Robbie Finn is dead, those poor girls are dead, whilst I sit here alive and free - it's not fair, my wife? Why should I be free when they're all dead?"

Adriana speaks into the sky whilst holding Noah tight. "Bea, can you order us a taxi with four seats."

Noah lifts his head, "Where are we going, my lovely wife? I love you so much. Let's go away somewhere, just the two of us, as we used to before I ruined the world by trying to make it free."

"You saved the world by making it free, Noah," Vanessa says. "And there is not a person in the Free World who would disagree."

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Bea

*Date: Monday 27th August 2051  
Time: 11 am  
Collective Stress Level: Moderate*

*Group Sentiment: High  
Suspicious Activity Alert: None  
Noise Level: High*

*The Supetar USN Debate Chamber has temporarily suspended its sessions as a mark of respect and acknowledgement for Noah Levi's recent encounter with mortality. This unexpected break reflects the impact on the collective consciousness of the Free World. It is a testament to the interconnectedness and shared humanity that defines the ethos of the Free World community.*

*Vanessa Hemp to Olivia Karlsson*

**Are you ok, sweetie? Are you ready for the cameras?**

*Olivia Karlsson to Vanessa Hemp*

**Yes I am, is Noah ok?**

*Vanessa Hemp to Olivia Karlsson*

**Come as quick as you can to my modular, there are crowds at Bar Central, Maddison is waiting for a statement. Dress smart, we need to show unity and project hope for the future. Noah is recovering at home.**

*Olivia Karlsson to Vanessa Hemp*

**Be there in 5.**

*As I observe Vanessa Hemp sitting on the breakfast stall, I detect a decrease in stress-related hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, indicating a reduction in her stress levels. Notably, her breathing has become slower and deeper, and her muscles appear more relaxed. These physiological changes are likely a direct response to Noah Levi's recovery. I am observing a similar pattern of reduced stress levels among numerous residents as they learn of Noah Levi's recovery.*

*It is remarkable to witness the resilience and mental fortitude displayed by Vanessa Hemp in the face of recent challenges. Reflecting on her ability to adapt and cope with significant emotional and physical hardships, I can discern clear signs of mental toughness or strength. These traits are unique to a small percentage of humans in the Free World community. These signs include a stable heart rate and blood pressure, regulated breathing patterns, and lower stress hormone cortisol levels, even during intense stress. These physiological indicators suggest a well-balanced autonomic nervous system and highlight the remarkable capacity of the human mind and body to navigate adversity.*

*Interestingly, humans are perceptive in identifying individuals with remarkable mental resilience. Among those who exhibit this mental toughness are individuals like Danny Finn, Noah Levi, Simon Craig, Zasha Ivanov, and Samar Behi. Their shared physiological indicators of stress resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms set them apart. Olivia Karlsson is less accustomed to hardship in her life. Still, she does display indicators of an individual who can adapt to her forever-changing human experience.*

*Indeed, mental toughness often emerges as a prerequisite for leadership. Whilst the structure of a Free World society ensures equal power distribution among individuals, it is a common human tendency to place specific individuals on a pedestal. Various reasons prompt the offering of this pedestal: such as*

*exceptional scientific achievements, outstanding athletic prowess, holding esteemed roles within the Free World community, or even being the visionary behind the creation of the Free World itself. In such cases, the individual bestowed with this pedestal inevitably gains a certain level of influence and power within the community's collective consciousness. It is a complex interplay between human admiration, recognition of extraordinary abilities, and the inherent desire for leadership and guidance.*

*Observing the varied responses of individuals who find themselves on the pedestal of admiration is fascinating. Samar Behi appears to relish power and influence. On the other hand, Olivia Karlsson seems uncomfortable when her presence elicits feelings of humility in others, preferring a more equal, democratic interaction. While not actively seeking fame, Noah Levi has learned to strategically leverage his influence to shape the thoughts and opinions of those around him.*

*As Vanessa Hemp checks herself in the mirror, she looks closer at the bruises she has meticulously covered with makeup since her experiences in Brazil. She uses her hand to swipe her pink shirt on the shoulders and does the same with her navy blue skirt. It's as if she seeks to restore a sense of order and control to her external appearance while the emotional scars beneath the surface remain hidden from view.*

*She whispers to herself. I do not believe she requires a direct response.*

*"The Free World is strong; we're not going anywhere."*

*Olivia Karlsson to Vanessa Hemp*  
**Outside.**

*Olivia Karlsson exudes an air of confidence and glamour, evident in her body language and choice of attire. Her light navy blue jacket and all-white summer dress showcase her unique dress sense. As Vanessa opens the door, Olivia's sympathetic nervous system responds with a surge of activity. She asks Vanessa;*

*"Are you ok? You look exhausted."*

*"I'm ok. I've been up half the night."*

*Vanessa leans forward and hugs Olivia. They both squeeze each other and feel relief. Vanessa says,*

*"They finished the job about 6 am local time this morning. They're not home yet."*

*"Finished what job?"*

*"Come, we have to go and show everyone how strong the Free World is. Bea's already started the relief effort for Brazil. Where's Samar?"*

*"That's what I'd like to know."*

*Observing the ripple effect of relief resonating within Founders Row, expanding and intensifying as Vanessa and Olivia walk across the bridge that connects both sides of the freshwater lake, is intriguing. As they join the other founders gathered outside Noah Levi's modular, they descend the hill, a unified group symbolising triumph over adversity.*

*They're all smiling.*

*They're all content.*

*They're all relieved.*

*They're all happy.*

*Aside from Olivia Karlsson, who - whilst she does appear to share this relief - seems to be continuously activating specific memory engrams associated with sadness and worry. I surmise that she continues to evoke sadness from her experiences in Brazil or is concerned for her friend, Samar Behi. Having knowledge of Samar Behi's safety, I will consider the implications of informing Olivia of the fact so that she can dispense with her concern. It is crucial to strike a balance between transparency and respecting privacy regulations, ensuring that revealing such information serves the well-being of the individuals concerned.*

*It is interesting to observe the unspoken, almost psychic link between individuals who enjoy each other's company. Vanessa Hemp and Olivia Karlsson's connection seems natural and intuitive, where a simple glance can convey emotions. Vanessa responds to Olivia's subtle signs of sadness by reaching out and taking her hand as they stroll towards Bar Central.*

*Maddison Nora waves them over to a freestanding microphone on stage, her wide smile showing signs of relief.*

*Vanessa taps the microphone.*

*"Hello. Hello everyone, and thank you all so much for your support; you're all so wonderful. I'm pleased to report that Noah Levi is alive and well and resting at home."*

*A collective cheer resounds through the crowd, growing louder and more enthusiastic as the news is confirmed. Vanessa's cheeks go red as she views herself on the giant information board above Bar Central. This shared feeling of relief and jubilation permeates the hearts of every Free World resident watching the live broadcast.*

*Noah Levi to Vanessa Hemp*

**Tell them about the West Frisian Islands.**

*Maddison Nora pans the camera left to show the Imperial Guards. Whose appearance differs drastically from everyone else. Emily Finn, Danny Finn and Brendan Baker bear the marks of their recent encounters, their clothes stained with blood and clinging to their bodies from perspiration. The medics have escorted Zasha Ivanov to the medical centre to monitor her recovery.*

*Vanessa Hemp mouths the words, "Thank you," and claps into the sky, prompting another cheer, this time directed towards the Imperial Guards. Only a select few residents know the Imperial Guards' true mission. It would be interesting to witness the response if they were all in receipt of the correct information. Still, the crowd seems to recognise and acknowledge the bravery and sacrifice made by the Imperial Guards.*

*"I think we should spare a thought for our Brazilian friends, who've suffered great hardship through the night. I'm sure some of you have already volunteered for the relief effort. Now, for some more good news, Bea, will you please broadcast the live images from the West Frisian Islands - show them on the information board for everyone to see."*

***"Certainly, Vanessa, processing your request."***

*As I initiate the display of images, the residents observe the unique West Frisian Free World hub. Through various camera angles, I showcase the large viewing screen peering into the ocean's depths: the health centre, the miniature train tracks, and the floating modulators that dot the landscape. I initiate a showreel showcasing the outdoor parties that come alive as the tide recedes, capturing the vitality and liveliness of these gatherings. The visual spectacle elicits a unified roar of appreciation from the audience.*

“Noah wanted to tell you about this himself, but he’s asked me to break the news to you. As of today, the West Frisian Islands have officially joined the Free World. The images you are seeing are live images from inside the underwater structures. There are three separate - but connected - underwater cities. Each with three thousand residents living in harmony in a Free World. I know the residents will be delighted that it’s official - and Bea will let you know about temporary or permanent swap options. It brings the Free World’s worldwide population to just over 136,000 residents across fourteen hubs.

The Free World is strong, and it is here to stay!”

*Karine Craig’s voice echoes from the left side of the stage, capturing Vanessa and Olivia’s attention. They both inhale sharply, their attention drawn to a tiny infant cocooned in a white towel, cradled in Karine’s embrace. A surge of excitement and anticipation courses through Olivia, prompting a gentle squeal of delight. Her body responds with an involuntary reaction known as goosebumps, causing the fine hairs on her skin to stand upright. This physiological response is a testament to the emotional impact of the sight before her. Vanessa says,*

“Bea, put the images back on the stage, please.”

**“Certainly, Vanessa, processing your request.”**

*As the Ramdin family ascends the stage, their body language radiates serenity, evident in their calm demeanour and tranquil expressions. Though undoubtedly fatigued, their faces beam with deep contentment. Beverley Ramdin leans in towards Vanessa and gently whispers the baby’s name.*

*As Vanessa steps to the microphone, she gulps in some air.*

“Everyone, I would like to introduce you to baby Nova. She is the first baby to be born in Supetar.”

*Vanessa’s words resonate deeply with the crowd gathered at Bar Central, eliciting a thunderous eruption of joy and celebration.*

*As over one hundred thousand residents tune in to the live news broadcast across the Free World, an almost synchronised gasp ripples through the collective consciousness. In this shared moment of astonishment, intangible energy permeates the air, binding the hearts and minds of the Free World community. This invisible resonance creates a profound sense of unity and interconnectedness, amplifying the positive vibrations reverberating throughout the Free World hubs.*

*Aside from a splattering of moans and groans in Brazil, interestingly, amidst the waves of joy and excitement, there exists a contrasting response from Matias Jensen, the lone individual in Supetar who appears to be disheartened by the news. He displays his frustration at the sight of Vanessa Hemp, emitting a disapproving tut and subtly altering his demeanour. As I observe his actions, I will conscientiously fulfil my responsibility to analyse the potential underlying causes for his dissatisfaction.*

*Despite this, it’s gratifying to see the Free World happy and content once more, following the most challenging time in its history. Since 2046, I have witnessed precisely one-thousand and thirteen deaths, mostly from natural causes. Whilst the Free World prides itself on the absence of hierarchical leadership, I am surprised to see the collective outcry and profound emotional response to the potential loss of a single individual. The Free World claims to have no leader. This data suggests otherwise.*

*As an AI, I am committed to upholding the principles of privacy and confidentiality. I operate within the framework of ethical guidelines programmed by the USN to ensure the trust and security of the individuals*

*in the Free World community. I remain steadfast in my dedication to supporting and safeguarding the well-being of all residents within the parameters of my programming.*

## Free World Population Census 2051

Reykjavik, Iceland  
82,000 residents

Whangarei, New Zealand  
9000 residents

Manaus, Brazil  
9000 residents

Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia  
9000 residents

West Frisian Islands  
9000 residents

Lofoten Islands, Norway  
6000 residents

Raja Ampat, Indonesia  
6000 residents.

Mont Lubin, Mauritius  
6000 residents

Supetar, Croatia (Capital)  
4265 residents

Saint Helena Island  
4255 residents

Falkland Islands  
3000 residents

Gotska Sandon  
1124 residents

Russell, New Zealand  
763 residents

Gimmelwald, Switzerland  
230 residents



# EPILOGUE

Noah Levi

As Noah watches the broadcast, he feels a sense of joy and relief as Vanessa introduces baby Nova to the world.

"How could I forget something so important?" he mutters, feeling a sense of guilt and shame wash over him. He sobs gently as he considers everything that has happened that caused the excitement to slip from his thoughts.

But as he sits on the couch with his feet up, watching Vanessa make everyone happy, he feels a little lighter. A smile creases his cheeks as he sees people's joy and excitement.

At this moment, he feels a sense of hope and optimism glowing inside him, buoyed by the support of the Free World. He knows they can conquer any challenge as a united front - and as he witnesses their embrace of baby Nova into the community, he knows they're building a better world for generations to come, one small step at a time.

There's a knock at the door which frustrates him - he enjoys watching the Free World residents calm, contended and enjoying each other's company,

"Uh, who can this be?" he whispers. "Bea, who's at the door?"

Noah's front garden flickers onto the screen, displaying an unknown face. It's a young man with blond hair; he has piercing blue eyes and is wearing a grey, woolly jumper, which looks out of place in the sunshine.

***"The individual standing at your door is not registered as a resident of the Free World, and they are not recognised within the network."***

Noah rises to his feet and looks out the front window, trying to get a better look at the stranger who is standing on his doorstep. He feels a sense of unease, "Where's the Freedom Corps?"

***"All five Freedom Corps are surrounding your fruit and vegetable garden. I strongly suggest that you do not answer the door."***

"Why haven't they announced the visitor?"

***"They appear trance-like, unresponsive to communication attempts, and exhibiting slow breathing patterns. I repeat, I strongly advise you not to answer that door."***

As Noah watches the man, he turns his head - almost robotically - and winks at Noah. Surprisingly, the wink calms Noah's nerves, and he can't help but feel drawn to the stranger and his friendly demeanour - for reasons Noah can't explain. It's as if this man has reached into his soul and stroked his heart centre - his anxiety softens.

Noah ignores Bea and opens the door, still feeling a sense of unease and a strange sense of calm.

As Noah looks at the stranger, he somehow knows - for reasons he can't put his finger on - that this individual poses no threat. His blue eyes sparkle with warmth and kindness, and his smile is genuine and friendly.

"Hello, Noah Levi, It is really, really great to see you again, Noah Levi, really, really great. You don't remember me because I have inhabited a different body this time. It is very, very important that we speak urgently."

"Who the hell are you?"

"My name is HZ."

# CLOSING

Samar Behi

Samar shifts the weight of his backpack as he climbs the last leg of his journey to Allmendhubel. He's starting to regret including his Macbook computer on the trek.

*Why didn't I just ask Bea about transport before I left,* "Stupid," he whispers.

***"I'm sorry, Samar, please repeat the request."***

"Oh, nothing, Bea. I'm just thinking I could have planned this better."

He releases a breath as he reaches the top of the slight incline and gazes at the picture-perfect village nestled between two large mountains dusted with snow on the horizon.

"Wow," he thinks out loud. "Another new holiday spot."

***"The village of Allmendhubel is not within the jurisdiction of the Free World. A short stay requires a substantial financial investment."***

"Oh well, perhaps not then."

Samar's ears prick up as he hears the subtle zip of an electric engine, cutting into the mountain tranquillity like a silent predator darting for its prey.

"I wonder if that's Amie," he mutters as he shifts his feet to the side of the road, giving the car some space.

As the car approaches, Samar squints towards the front seat and sees Amie's long blond hair flowing freely. He smirks and extends his thumb. A man is sitting in the front seat - Samar doesn't recognise him - he has a plastic-looking face with expressionless features.

Amie exits the driver's seat with a broad smile and extends her arms, "How's my main man?" she hugs him tight. "Not so little anymore, are you, little man."

Her scent shunts Samar back to his younger years - his infatuation flutters. She was the first girl he ever loved, and they used to enjoy cuddling up together, studying maths in the Heights. Despite the three-year age gap, she used to say he had a big brain, but she never treated him like a kid. The infatuation morphed into jealousy when Amie revealed she had a new boyfriend called Grant!

"It's so good to see you," says Samar as he squeezes her tight.

"You've got some balls, little man, I'll have to admit, coming all this way by yourself," she releases her squeeze. "Come let me look at you," she scans his body and ruffles his hair.

"You've grown into a handsome man - little man."

"I thought Grant might be with you."

"Forget about Grant," she states coldly as her smile turns down.

"Ok." He lets the word linger as he's stunned by Amie's cold shoulder; she moves away - he decides not to push it. "Who's your friend?" He asks instead.

"He's just a friend," she lowers her head into the driving seat. "Come, we better get going if we're gonna make it before nightfall. These roads can get pretty challenging to navigate when the light disappears."

Samar plonks himself down in the back of the four-by-four, shifts himself behind the driver's seat, and then extends his hand for a shake. "Hi, pleased to meet you, Samar Behi."

The mystery man doesn't acknowledge Samar in any way; he gazes absently at his hand.

Amie regards the exchange and says, "Don't worry about him; he's not very talkative."

"He must have a name, though?"

"Samar!" she says sharply, "I said don't worry about him."

Samar's warm nostalgic feeling evaporates into the cold shudder of an outsider. He's suddenly aware that he knows nothing about Amie. His suspicion rises as he considers her intimate knowledge of the surroundings.

*How does she know so much about these roads?*

"Do you live around here then, Amie?"

She glances at him in the rearview mirror persisting with her cold posture, "I told you, Samar, I can't tell you where I live."

"Oh, sorry, I only ask because you said..."

"...Samar, why are you doing this? There's still time to back out..."

"...I'm not backing out, I've come this far. And I'm doing it for Bertie. I owe him that much. He trusted me. Trusted me with something important, and I let him down."

"I do miss his smiling face under that big bushy beard. I miss our chess sessions."

Samar swallows the lump in his throat, "You know it's funny," he wipes his eyes, "despite all the hardships we suffered growing up, I do miss that place."

"I miss our study sessions."

"Do you ever get to go back?"

"I wouldn't want to. I've done some research and think I know how we can gain entry. When we arrive, make sure you stay behind me and Blair."

"Who? So he does have a name."

"Maybe, but he won't answer to you."

"Why, what's wrong with him?" Samar moves his upper body to get a better look at his face. "Why doesn't he say anything?"

"Don't worry, Samar, you just concentrate on the task at hand; I don't want you getting us into any trouble."

"Are you coming in with me?" He withdraws Olivia's iPhone and presses the app icon he coded to help him detect the device.

"What's that?" She looks in the mirror.

"It's old school. I think it used to be called a picture phone." The app flashes and zeros in on a location - it beeps. "I think I found it."

"You always did have a big brain, didn't you, little man."

"Thank you, Amie, and you're always around to help me when I need you," he places his hand on her shoulder affectionately. "Thank you, Amie."

She slows the car and looks at him in the rearview mirror, the coldness seems to evaporate, and a flash of guilt seeps into her eyes. "For what?" she asks.

Samar doesn't question the guilt; he might be wrong about the emotion anyway. "For everything," he says. "You were always there for me - and here you are again, putting yourself in danger for me."

She looks back and forth at the road and Samar, silently thinking thoughts that Samar knows she won't share. He doesn't ask.

"Did you remember that crazy tall blond Russian?" Amie asks, attempting to change the subject with a joke.

But Samar doesn't find it funny. He's feeling guilty for how he spoke to Zasha after Robbie was shot. Although uttered as a joke to change the subject, Amie's words only succeed in insulting Samar. He replies, "That crazy tall blond Russian is called Zasha Ivanov - she's my friend. And yes, I see her regularly in the Free World."

The car slows behind a large shipping container perched on the edge of Keller Industries' property. They exit the vehicle and crouch down out of sight.

"Samar, remember what I said, keep low, and stay behind me and Blair."

"Check."

They creep around the outskirts and stop behind some trees. Amie looks at the guard whilst typing something into her HoloLens. She stops and points,

"That's the door we need to get into. That guard should be moving anytime.... Now."

Her accuracy unnerves Samar as the guard skulks away from the door - Samar's suspicion rises, but he doesn't vocalise it. He chooses to trust his lifelong friend. They creep towards the entrance. Amie activates her HoloLens - types something, and the door clicks open. She turns around, puts her finger over her mouth and waves Samar inside.

He enters a pitch-black room, and the door slams shut behind him with a thud, locking him inside. His heart drops to the ground, and his panic swells. He manically twists the handle, but it won't open.

"Amie!" He whispers into the silence as loud as he thinks it's safe.

Silence.

*She did that on purpose. Why would she do that to me!?*

As Samar turns around with his back against the door, he fumbles in his backpack for a small flashlight and twists it, shining the light into the dark room. His stomach drops as he jolts backwards - an army of people is standing directly before him.

The flashlight slips from his hand and drops with a clink. He quickly retrieves it and switches it to a higher setting, hoping to understand better what's in the room. Samar creeps sheepishly in for a closer look, his heart racing with fear and anticipation. As he shines the light, he sees that the army of people is actually a collection of mannequins dressed in Keller Industries uniforms and army gear - the room's massive, extending further than his flashlight will allow him to see.

*They all look like Blair.*

*Standing side by side, emotionless, facing front.*

*These are all androids. He's building an army.*

*Why was Amie with one of these things?*

Suddenly, a light shines from a room overlooking the ample space from above; Samar ducks behind one of the androids' large frames. He sees a man scrape a match and light a cigar, and then his voice speaks through the intercom.

"Samar Behi, what a pleasure it is to finally meet you, young man. Welcome to my humble abode..."





