

PROLOGUE

You grow up fast in the Heights. First two rules: don't trust anyone, and if you see a drone it's already too late. Samar freezes as the drone's spotlight sweeps the vicinity through the dark night, holding his breath as the engine hum fades into the streets.

Samar slips into the alleyway next to the library, scanning the area and clutching a stack of books to his chest. He stole the books, sure - but Mr. B always said they had to be returned. Back to the wall, Samar creeps forward, tucks the books into his jacket, grabs the rusted old drainpipe and climbs towards the open window.

Leaving the street hum behind he falls in, landing silently, staying alert in case his nook has been infiltrated by a Cyke, releasing a breath as the scent of paper and ancient wisdom surrounds him.

For now, he is safe.

PRELUDE

Dark Side Of The Moon (2040)

Aboard the small starship hidden in the shadow of the moon, the Zincods are interrupted in their empathic observation of humanity as they become aware of a vibrational disturbance in the quantum field. Collectively they perceive that a large ship is approaching through hyperspace and will soon arrive. As the quantum event draws near it becomes clear that the incoming ship is a Galactic Federation cruiser, here to evaluate the Zincods' findings.

Given their lengthy lifespans and their ability to empathically link with all lifeforms, the Zincods have long been considered the watchers of the galaxy, gathering data on emerging species and reporting on their suitability for joining the Federation. Their particular sensitivity to the vibrational frequencies of the universe allows the Zincods to be aware of quantum potentiality in a way that has led most of the species on the Council to trust them implicitly in their observations of a prospective people.

Earth, however, is considered contentious in its consideration so far, and humanity is not well liked by many in the Federation.

As the designated captain of their starship, the Zincod known as HZ opens his consciousness into the control system. The interior of the ship is oddly devoid of what most beings would consider controls. The walls are smooth and rounded, unburdened by panels or screens. In the centre of the mostly empty main deck, a ring of smooth projections from the floor form the seats upon which the Zincods now place themselves, crossing their thin legs underneath them. As one, the group of Zincods feel a sense of completion as the potentiality of the arrival of the galactic cruiser settles into present reality. If it could be seen, the cruiser would dwarf the Zincods' vessel, but to avoid detection by Earthlings their cloaking field remains active. Extending his quantum field to the bridge of the arriving cruiser, HZ extends an aura of welcome to the waiting council. The rest of the Zincods add their empathic connection and soon their consciousnesses are projected aboard the cruiser alongside HZ.

The council, made up of an assortment of species from around the galaxy, allow the Zincods to create a collective space of communication in their minds. Soon, they are all gathered in what might best be described as a virtual meeting room. HZ examines the conscious output of the council and creates a private empathic pocket of his mind in which to privately express his dismay without projecting it to the group. The Commander of this council is known to him - a Yggrand that has been highly critical of humanity and their prospects for joining the Federation. In this mental space, the Yggrand has no need for the hardy exosuit that their species wears for interstellar travel. Instead they appear in their natural form - six dextrous, strong, tentacle-like structures attached to an

amorphous central hub with special cells that rearrange spontaneously into the required sensory organs. Their mouth forms out of habit despite not being necessary to communicate with the Zincods, and they address the crew of watchers.

"Zincod delegation, the Federation grows impatient with the disturbance to galactic vibrational frequency caused by Earth. This sector of the galaxy threatens to unbalance the carefully curated Quantum Song. The Earthlings continue to sow disharmony. The time draws near when the Federation must decide whether Earth may be saved, or if this sector should be allowed to destroy itself in the interest of preserving the remainder of our interstellar frequency."

The Zincods feel the derision that the Yggrand unintentionally projects. Throughout the history of the galaxy, the Federation has operated in the interest of the Quantum Song, gently urging the fractal consciousness of the universe into vibrational harmony, and allowing creatures whose consciousnesses disturb that harmony to die off, as those that operate in discord inevitably do. When a species proves itself to be capable of living within the collective good, the Federation initiates First Contact, offering technical and spiritual advances that they would take aeons to develop on their own.

HZ does his best to project a sense of calm and understanding as he addresses the council. He wordlessly impresses upon them his belief that Earth is worth saving, that humans are capable of working in the collective good. Many of the beings present in the shared space feel a sense of relief at the assertion. The Yggrand, however, remains unconvinced.

"Zincod delegation, your opinion holds much sway with this council," they begin. "And yet my memory is longer than many of the council members." Unwittingly their mind flits to harsh memories - a mistake made generations ago. The Zincods judged a civilization worthy of federal membership that went on to sow discord and war among many stellar communities. The species' warlike ways were more deeply-seated in their consciousness than the Zincods has predicted, and galactic unrest amongst lower level species had broken out. The Quantum Song had temporarily dipped into a frequency of fear and hatred. Yggrands had borne much of the burden of that conflict, and ever since they had been highly suspicious of potential new members.

Acknowledging the feelings of the Yggrand Commander, HZ imprints the suggestion that they not allow fear of the past to hold sway over the future. He calls upon his empathic impression of humanity as a species of great potential. That properly guided they could have much to offer the galaxy. As the idea settles into their collective consciousness, a pocket of dissent arises within the Zincod ranks.

Not all the Zincods share HZ's optimism for the human race. Into the projected mindspace, the Zincods begin to share their individual impressions of the Earthlings. Images of war and conflict are countered with those of personal sacrifice and compassion. He communicates to the Federation that humanity is in a state of quantum

flux, a tipping point in their potential that could lead them down several paths. He puts forth that it is his firm belief that with the intervention of First Contact, they will gain the clarity to prevail in raising the collective frequency of consciousness. But not all the watchers agree.

"The dissent among you is not comforting," the Yggrand begins, as he draws on the empathic connection to discern the opinions of the rest of the council. "The future of humanity can not be decided when there is such an unclear impression. The request for First Contact is denied. And yet neither shall the Federation abandon this sector to it's own destruction without proper analysis. Our cruiser has several outposts to visit during this cycle. We shall return at the end of said cycle, at which point we will require a unanimous decision from the watchers. Use whatever methods of observation you wish, but revelation of our presence is strictly forbidden, as is the offering of direct aid. When we return, the future of humankind will be decided."

The empathic connection is abruptly severed as the Federation cruiser spools up their engine for departure. HZ holds the connection with his fellow watchers for a moment longer as they allow the situation to settle. They have one cycle left to observe. Making a quick mental calculation HZ sets their timeline. Ten Earth years. Ten years for humanity to find its way, or be left to their own destruction.

CHAPTER ONE

(2042)

Washington D.C
Danny Finn

Squinting through the rain on the windshield of his beat-up old car, Danny Finn's thoughts are as grey as the sky above. *It never ends*, he muses to himself, banging on the glass to urge the resistant wipers into action again, *Though I suppose I should consider myself lucky. At least I have a car, even if it is a pile of crap*. If he had even a relatively new model he could connect to the car through his implant and the broken wipers wouldn't be a problem - he could simply set the autopilot protocols and let the car drive him to work on its own. But he can barely keep this junker functioning consistently on a day-to-day basis.

He promises himself that he'll try to fix the sticky wipers on his day off this week. Most people these days don't have the skill set to fix up pre-implant mechanics, *But then again*, Danny thinks as he drives past a guarded border to the Heights, *most people don't have much at all these days*. The people living through there, *If you can really call that living*, Danny considers darkly, are rejected from functional society, relegated to contained slums that the government pretends are for the protection of residents both inside and out.

As he finally pulls up to the security gate at work, Danny's implant automatically changes his hologram from his driving Heads Up Display (HUD) to ID and Security Clearance. Leaning his head toward the scanner so it can read his biometric data, he watches as he is connected to the Network, which projects a bright green message directly onto his retina:

DANNY FINN - ASSISTANT FLOOR MANAGER - AUTHORIZED

The gate slides open, granting him access to Reuger Arms, the largest munitions corporation in the USA; a megalithic company supporting the American war efforts both abroad and at home. Danny has held his position in the warehouses for a good number of years now. The hours are gruelling and the pay leaves much to be desired, but there are few industries as dependable as war, so at least he hasn't ever feared the loss of his job. Having a job in today's world means the difference between survival (albeit laced with restricted freedoms), and joining the lost souls in the hell-on-earth that is the Heights. It also means access to the local Network through a job-issued implant. Without that, you are essentially cut off from interacting with the 'civilized' world. So

although Danny doesn't particularly enjoy his job, with a family to take care of he makes sure to remain grateful for it.

As he drives forward through the gate his HUD informs him that there are available parking spots three levels down in the parkade. *This would have been so useful back when I was in the military*, he thinks, reflecting on the two tours he served in his youth. All soldiers have implants now, of course, often much better ones than civilians, but fifteen years ago when Danny joined up, they hadn't been integrated yet. They'd had preliminary google systems that could display some information, but back then everyone still primarily used handheld devices that were reliant on the now-defunct satellite grid. Back then it hadn't yet all gone so wrong...

Danny gives his head a quick shake, trying to clear away the memories of all that had come between then and now. Military life hadn't suited him particularly well, but Danny still feels a sense of pride in his time as a Construction Technician in the Forces. It gave him so many of the skills he still values. These days, he doesn't even recognize the institution he had fought for. These days the might of the military is often turned on its own people (for public safety, they claim). These days, the thought that disturbs him the most is that his young son, Robbie, will face mandatory conscription when he turns 16.

All those years ago it had seemed that they were still fighting for freedom. *And where did all that freedom go after we fought for it?* he grimly wonders. At least his field experience and training had helped him land a job at Reuger. It may not use him to his full potential, but it is a job, and that's more than most these days.

Strolling into the office to clock in, Danny catches sight of one of his few work friends. Harold's stooped, squat frame, and balding head are a stark contrast to Danny's athletic build and youthful glow, but despite their differences the two have become fast friends over the long days in the warehouses. Currently, Harold seems to be attempting to impart twenty years of experience all at once to Neil, a recent hire. From the exasperated look that he shoots over, Danny guesses it isn't going as well as Harold had hoped.

Neil seems like a decent guy, if overly curious and desperate to please. He often comes across like a puppy trying to gain the approval of its owner. On paper it's a quality that might seem perfect for a new employee, but Danny finds him slightly off-putting in a way he can never quite put his finger on. *Perhaps*, he considers, *it's just the nervous energy of a kid starting a new job*. But Neil often comes across as overly interested in people's personal lives. Once, that might not have seemed so suspicious to Danny, but these days, 'overly interested' is just as likely to get you in trouble as it is to help you make friends. The 'military-forces-disappearing-you-in-the-night' kind of trouble, and he wants no part of that.

All the same, Harold's annoyed expression brings a chuckle out of Danny - a welcome amusement on a dreary, grey morning.

"Glad you find this so dang funny, Dan!" Harold tosses across the room.

"Ah, you gotta learn to laugh at the little things, Harry," Danny replies while leaning his eye toward the scanner that officially starts his shift.

Harold's face splits into a familiar smirk. "Well, I don't have as much experience as you do with *little things*," he retorts, holding two fingers a scant few inches apart. Danny rolls his eyes as Harold cackles in response to his own crude joke.

"You're your own best audience member, Harry."

"That's just because I've got good taste! Now yet your ass over here and help me figure this out, mister Assistant Manager. Seems like Albert has better things to do this morning."

Danny nods, internally wondering where his supervisor, Albert Shanaghan, could be. He picks up the coffee jug and saunters over while pouring himself a mug of the steamy caffeine-delivery system. "What seems to be the problem?"

Neil stands up from the virtual control station they are gathered around, making the confident eye contact that Danny finds so strange. Rising to his full height, Neil is still a head shorter than Danny, with sandy-brown hair combed almost too neatly, but he's never seemed intimidated in the least by either Danny's size or authority.

"Mr. Finn, how's it going?" he chimes happily, extending his hand for a handshake. Danny gestures helplessly with his full hands, but after catching the confused look spreading across Neil's face, he deftly leans his elbow forward to bump Neil's in greeting.

"Oh, yes, of course," says Neil, laughing his mistake off and lingering in the elbow contact a moment too long for comfort. Then with a wink he continues with his usual line of questioning.

"How's Emily? Is she well? I hope the hospital hasn't been working her too hard. And little Robbie, he's doing well in school? You're so lucky to have such a beautiful family!" he intones with genuine warmth.

"Yeah, um, they're good, thanks," Danny replies uncomfortably as Harold shrugs a half-hearted apology from behind.

Even though they'd had a number of days to acclimatize, Neil's penchant for asking what felt like probing personal questions still rubs Danny the wrong way. Looking a little guilty for causing the situation, Harold steps forward to keep any more questions at bay. "Here, let me bring you in," he says, turning to the station in front them. Currently it looks like little more than an empty desk, but Harold presses a finger to the surface and Danny's implant links up, allowing him to see the virtual control station that promptly materializes around them.

With all of them linked, Danny gestures for Neil to take his seat while Harold begins to point out the issue. "As you can see, for some reason Neil's implant isn't registering properly in the syst- well I'll be damned..." Harold cuts himself off as the station logo, which just a moment before was showing the red "disconnected" symbol,

suddenly clicks into a pleasant blue startup icon and Neil's controls flick into view. Harold's face contorts through a series of emotions: surprise, suspicion, relief, and finally frustration.

Danny blows on his coffee looking mightily pleased with himself. "Relax Harry, there was probably just a glitch in the Network and when you patched me in, my managerial clearance gave the system a quick reboot that purged it." He takes a quick sip and turns to leave before Harold can ask any follow up questions. He's just as mystified about the system glitch, but he doesn't need Harold knowing that. Or Neil for that matter, who waves as Danny returns the jug to the coffee maker on his way out.

"Thanks Mr. Finn, you're always setting things right!" he calls cheerily alongside another wink. Unsure how to respond to that, Danny smiles and lifts his mug in acknowledgement as he escapes out the door.

He's a good kid, just....a little awkward... he thinks as he takes the elevator to his first station stop of the day.

As the day progresses, Albert continues his disappearing act, and Danny finds himself having to fix all sorts of little problems that usually aren't his to solve. The two of them have been friends for years, as have their wives, who are both nurses at the same hospital. So while the unexplained absence is annoying, Danny dutifully oversees his friend's responsibilities as well as his own. Albert has taught him the system well, and so he barely misses a beat all morning, although the extra work is draining. Because of this, when lunchtime rolls around he makes a beeline for the break room where he finds Harold once again - this time mercifully alone.

"You heard from Al yet Danno?" Harold asks nervously as Danny sits heavily beside him.

"Nothing yet bud, maybe he called in sick?" Danny offers half-heartedly. If there had been a call, the system would have alerted him already, but he doesn't feel like considering any alternatives.

"I hope it hasn't got anything to do with the attack this morning," Harold mutters, almost to himself.

"Attack?"

"Jesus Danny, haven't you seen the news?"

"I've been a *little* preoccupied doing two people's jobs, jerkface," replies Danny, shooting Harold a mildly incredulous look as he wearily connects to the Network and activates the holographic news display.

His incredulity melts away as images of smoking rubble and rushing paramedics command his attention while a reporter continues their coverage.

"...newest attack from rebel groups, this time in downtown Washington D.C. While the government has put forth a very public effort to quash this so-called rebellion over the past few years, progress appears to be slight at best..."

In a corner of the image, a 'Confirmed Death Toll' counter unceremoniously ticks ever upward:

-110 dead-

"In the past, attacks such as these have focused mainly on military strongholds and government holdings - viewers may recall the attack on the broadcast station just two years ago that left the public without implant Network access for a full 48 hours."

-123 dead-

Danny remembers the incident well. He also recalls how the military had responded with a devastating show of force, sweeping through the Heights to take down supposed rebel cells. He's pretty certain that they hadn't bothered confirming targets; the violence was more than likely just a deterrent for rebel activity and sympathy. Clearly it hadn't worked that well though, because now Danny is looking at the wreckage of half a city block.

-131 dead-

"However, today marks the first attack with such significant civilian casualties. Earlier this morning a group of as-yet-unidentified rebels descended on what is being described by authorities as a 'military safehouse', deep within a residential community. While drones were dispatched to reclaim the building, witnesses report that when the ensuing firefight escalated, the group that authorities are officially labelling as a domestic terrorist organization, detonated an explosive device that wreaked havoc on the surrounding buildings."

-148 dead-

The comments section scrolling up the other side of Danny's display is overloaded with people offering prayers and condolences, as well as those desperately attempting to make contact with missing loved ones.

"Oh crap, you don't think..." Danny can't bring himself to say it.

"I dunno man, has Albert ever just not shown up before?"

Danny knows that he hasn't. Albert is a workhorse, and he takes his job seriously. "What would he even be doing in that area of the city?" Danny wonders aloud, refusing to accept that his friend and boss could have been caught in the devastation.

-154 dead-

Harold opens his mouth to respond, but before he can, Danny gets an alert that shuts his newsfeed off. "Sorry Harry," he interrupts, "looks like Manny wants a word. Maybe he knows where Al is," he offers with an unconvincing shrug. Neither of them can bring themselves to look directly at the other; they both know that a meeting with Manny can't be good news.

CHAPTER TWO

Danny Finn

Manny Reuger is the current CEO of Reuger Arms. Danny has only been summoned to his office a handful of times, but it's been enough that he has formed a very secure opinion of Manny. In short - that he's an asshole. Manny is young, though Danny is unsure of his actual age. He looks to be about 25, but he acts more like a spoiled 10-year-old. He inherited the company a few years ago. His parents had been vacationing in Hawaii when the tsunami hit. Nothing much remains of the Hawaiian Islands, and the Reuger family super-yacht went down with all hands.

His father hadn't been an especially benevolent man, but Manny quickly grew to be hated pretty much universally by Reuger employees. He's brash, immature, and quick to anger. He doesn't seem particularly interested in learning how the company actually works, but demands that things run smoothly, and that productivity and profits remain high.

The elevator leading to the executive suites is through a security door behind the reception desk at the building's main entrance. Shelley Crimson, the receptionist for Reuger as well as Manny's personal secretary, looks up as Danny approaches. She sweeps her long auburn hair to the side, tucking it behind an ear, and smooths the front of her blouse. She's practiced at hiding it, but Danny has gotten to know her well enough over the years that through her pleasant smile, he can tell that she is secretly fuming.

"Danny, I swear to god, one day I am going to lose it and he is going to get one of my high heels somewhere *very unpleasant*," she replies under her breath; Shelley is always kind to Danny. They may not have socialized much outside of work, but while at Reuger they have developed a pleasantly familiar camaraderie.

She releases her deep breath in a defeated sigh. "Just another day at the office, I suppose. He's waiting for you, so head on up." He places a conciliatory hand on her shoulder, which she squeezes appreciatively as she buzzes him through.

The security door opens onto a long, narrow, marble-floored hallway lined with portraits of Reuger executives from over the years. The only purpose it serves is to lead to the private elevator shaft at the far end, and it's Danny's opinion that it's designed merely to intimidate anyone heading up to the offices. It has the opposite effect on him, serving as a reminder of how inept the current CEO is in comparison. The elevator shaft rises through the floors, giving a good view of the main layout of Reuger Arms through the glass wall on the back. Before long, the elevator arrives in the highest section of the compound. The executive tower boasts floor to ceiling windows in most of the offices, which are occupied by people wearing sharp suits. He can feel the disdain of his so-called 'better-thans' as he crosses to the elevator door at the far end of the floor, their

eyes taking in his ensemble of jeans, boots, and a plaid shirt, and instantly judging him as inferior.

He strides confidently past their glass doors with his head held high. The scanner next to the gold elevator quickly authorizes him as an approved visitor and the doors slide open. It only takes him the equivalent of one floor up to Manny's raised office, from which he presides over the whole company.

As the doors on the other side of the elevator slide open, Danny has only a brief second to react as a golf ball comes hurtling toward his head. Luckily, his reflexes are sharp after years of training in martial arts, and he shifts his weight just far enough to the side for the ball to miss him and careen off the back of the elevator, leaving a noticeable dent.

"Dandy! Didn't see you there!" Manny smirks from across the room, where he is swinging a putter up to rest on his shoulder. Danny hates the nickname that his boss gave him a few years ago, but always taking it with a smile has somehow ingratiated him with the man-child.

"That's quite a swing you've got there Mr. Rueger! I wouldn't want to face off against you on the green." Danny hopes that the forced smile plastered across his face comes across as genuine. For the moment, at least, it seems like Manny is buying it, or at the very least is oblivious as he lines up another golf ball.

"Dandy, Dandy, Dandy. You know, I've always liked you. You know your place," says Manny, jabbing the air in Danny's direction with his club. Danny doesn't think it's a compliment, but he rolls with it to make things easy.

"Thank you, Mr. Reuger," he says deferentially, while imagining grabbing the putter and swinging it into Manny's face.

Manny swings and chips his ball with a decent thwack, sending it ricocheting around the room. He had been aiming near to Danny, and when there is no flinch accompanying the strike of the ball, his face splits into a wide grin. He points towards Danny with the putter again.

"That's my guy. I like that. You're steady Dandy, like a rock. Dependable. You don't flinch in the face of a challenge. Congrats, you're the new Floor Manager. I'll have Shelley process the promotion starting this afternoon. It's more hours, but I know I can depend on you. Right?" Manny already appears bored with the conversation, and he wanders over to a drinks cart sporting more than one broken bottle after his putting session. He selects one of the fancier looking bottles with a thirsty gleam in his eye.

"Mr. Reuger?" Danny probes. Manny looks around in surprise, as if he is shocked to see that Danny is still there.

"Something unclear Dandylion?"

While Danny isn't going to complain about what is arguably an improvement on his nickname, he still needs answers. "I was just wondering, sir...what happened to Albert?"

"Shanaghan? He's dead. Now go enjoy your promotion, before I change my mind," Manny waves Danny away as he takes a big swig of fancy brown liquor directly from the bottle.

Somewhat stunned at Manny's casual delivery, Danny turns and marches back into the elevator. Although his mind is racing, he crosses the floor with a stone-faced expression. Once the elevator doors close, however, he slides down the glass wall and sits with his head in his shaking hands, allowing the tears for his deceased friend to flow.

CHAPTER THREE

Danny Finn

The rest of the day goes by in a blur as Danny's credentials are updated in the Network and he officially assumes full managerial duties. He can barely meet the eyes of the people in his division. Albert was well liked, and the transition is more than a little abrupt for all involved. Danny does his best to put on a brave face as he offers condolences and reorganizes the division's personnel, but internally he is experiencing a maelstrom of emotions. On the one hand, the promotion means a not insignificant pay raise, which will certainly be welcome despite the longer hours. On the other hand, his heart aches at the loss of his good friend - he can't yet bring himself to think about April and Clint, Albert's wife and son. He won't be able to avoid it for long though. After work he is slated to pick up both his own wife, Emily and April from the hospital where they work.

The upcoming interaction weighs heavily on Danny's mind as he exits the parkade, and occupies his attention as he starts the drive across town. He tries to distract himself with various streams on the Network, but most are occupied with reporting on the attack, and one of the only streams he finds that isn't, is playing a report on a new international eco-terrorist cell calling themselves GreenPlanetX. *Can't these assholes find something better to do than make everyone else's lives harder?* he thinks to himself, letting his anger about Albert rise up.

Frustrated, he gestures to dismiss the stream as a construction detour appears on the road ahead. Any other day, the fact that the detour isn't registering on his HUD would have caused him to hesitate, but as it is he absentmindedly turns from his usual route and follows the physical orange 'detour' signs. Soon, they have led him directly into an alleyway with no exit. Puzzled, he tosses his car into reverse, but has to slam on the brakes as a large, unmarked van pulls in behind, boxing him in. He gives two quick honks of his horn to urge them out of the alleyway, but in response the van turns on its high beams, momentarily blinding Danny.

Before he can fully register what is happening, several balaclava-clad figures carrying military-grade firearms surround him. The one closest to the driver's side window points his gun directly at Danny, and in a practiced deliberate motion clicks the safety off. He barks an order to get out of the vehicle, which Danny notices is delivered in a polished British accent. Adrenaline surges through Danny's body, but with a calming breath his well-developed situational awareness kicks in. He attempts to subtly gesture through his holographic menu to reach the icon to make an emergency call. The British fellow just outside his window seems to notice, and menaces even closer. Acknowledging that he doesn't have many other options he keeps his hands in view as much as possible as he slowly unbuckles his seatbelt and opens the door. Apparently too slowly for the figures though, who fling the door wide as soon as it is cracked,

yanking Danny out of the car and onto his knees. Before he can place the all-important emergency call a black hood is slipped over his head from behind and his holographic display goes blank. Cursing inwardly but keeping his composure, he cooperates as he is bundled hurriedly into the van. *If they wanted to kill me, they likely would have done it by now.*

He feels the van pull quickly out of the alleyway, and uses the motion to orient himself, beginning to build a map inside his mind. He makes estimations of approximate distances using the feel of the driving speed, while making mental notes of several turns in quick succession. Before too long he hears what he guesses to be a garage door opening and the van drives down a ramp, squealing to a stop.

Nearly two decades' worth of training in martial arts, on top of his military education, has always left Danny feeling confident in most situations; he knows how to handle himself. But as he is marched out of the van and forced to his knees once more, the only thing he is confident in, is that he's in serious trouble. When the hood is pulled off his head he quickly scans the area, taking in the underground garage and desperately searching for an advantage. There's the black van he was brought in, as well as another nondescript van on the opposite side, this one white. The garage itself is covered in meshed wiring that Danny identifies as a makeshift faraday cage to block incoming and outgoing signals.

That must be why my implant is disconnected from the Network, Danny realizes. They're prepared for this. Highly organized with access to military weapons....but these aren't military personnel...

Danny is unnerved to see them removing their balaclavas. If they are willing to show him their faces, they must be pretty certain that he won't be able to turn them in to the authorities. *That doesn't bode well for my chances of getting out of this,* he contemplates, his mind racing as he tries to figure out what they might want from him. It clearly isn't a robbery, but their intentions remain as much of a mystery to him as their identity.

Two of them begin to unload some crates from the black van, and with a sinking feeling Danny recognizes the markings denoting them as Reuger Arms goods. The remaining three form up, training their weapons on Danny. There's a sharp young Black woman in combat boots with a tight afro that is shaved on the sides of her head. She's holding her automatic rifle with a relaxed grace that only serves to heighten her intimidating presence - Danny is sure she won't hesitate to squeeze the trigger. Next to her is a towering Black man with a fully shaved head and more muscle than is entirely reasonable bulging through his tactical gear. He has a large knife secured at his thigh and two pistols holstered on his belt. The rifle he is holding is aimed at Danny with a steady precision that only comes from years of training.

"Terry, we're all secure out here," the third figure calls out, revealing himself as the British man who ordered Danny out of his car. He is much lither than the other man, but

the way he carries himself tells a story of physical prowess. He has darkly tanned skin and is slightly out of place dressed in smart business attire. All three of them wear a patch over one of their eyes, a curiosity Danny has little time to puzzle over before the rear door of the white van swings open and an absolute mountain of a man steps out. He is easily six foot five, with long blonde hair tied back in a ponytail and one piercing blue eye contrasted with yet another eyepatch. His face is covered in stubble and scars that Danny is sure are from combat. He's outfitted in a beaten-up old leather jacket and dark camo pants, looks to be in the upper end of his forties, and strikes an imposing figure that projects an aura of command.

Danny knows he is hopelessly outmanned, but he matches the stony, emotionless expression displayed on the massive blonde man's face, squaring his shoulders and meeting his gaze directly as he approaches. The man Danny assumes to be 'Terry' comes to a stop a few feet away from him, appraising the captive carefully. He is just outside of striking distance, letting Danny know that while he is confident, he is also careful. This is a man that doesn't take unnecessary risks; he won't be caught off guard easily. Terry turns to his associates and raises an eyebrow in silent question. A quick nod from them is apparently all the answer he needs, and he addresses Danny directly in a thick Brooklyn accent.

"Danny Finn- Army veteran, construction technician corps. Wife: Emily Finn - nurse. Son: Robbie Finn - aged 8. Until this morning, you were Assistant Floor Manager at the Reuger Arms Warehouses... I have to admit, you aren't quite what I expected."

It's clear that this presentation is designed to rattle him, but Danny doesn't flinch even at the mention of his family. He simply returns Terry's steely gaze and rises to his feet to take a dangerous chance. "Terry Whogivesashit: Rebel leader, terrorist, murderer, exactly the sort of scum I expected would be responsible for the deaths of so many innocents; you killed a good friend of mine today."

A stunned silence echoes through the garage and Danny is aware of grips tightening on weapons before Terry's granite face finally cracks and splits into a wide grin. "Ah shit," he says with a low chuckle, turning toward the lithe man who had summoned him, "I shoulda known better than to bet against you, Denzil." Denzil breaks into a maniacal laugh and slings his rifle over his shoulder by the strap.

"HaHA! Pay up mates! I told you, the bugger's harder than he looks!" Denzil is doing a ridiculous little victory dance as the others begrudgingly dig into pockets to retrieve various trinkets and treats that have been staked in whatever their wager had been. Danny is a bit thrown by the suddenly relaxed attitude, but before he can think too long on it Terry is motioning him to some fold-out chairs that have just been set up by the unloaded crates.

"Danny, come over here and sit with us. Don't worry, we're not going to hurt you." He gestures for the others to put their weapons away. Danny sits down, leans back in his chair and tosses his feet up on a crate.

"So what are you then?" Danny questions. "The Brotherhood of Freedom? The Christian Resistance? Maybe these new assholes I keep hearing about, GreenPlanetX?" If he can figure out what brand of crazy this group is he might be able to figure a way out of this.

"You're astute, I'll give you that much Danny," Terry begins, "and you've got a set of big brass balls for sure, but you're not seeing the bigger picture. Yeah, we're part of a rebellion, and yeah, I am the leader - at least on the east coast. I'll even grant you that I'm not the most handsome fella," he continues, absentmindedly tracing one of his larger facial scars. "However, we're not seeking attention with a silly name, we're not fighting to cause fear, we don't kill needlessly, and we definitely didn't murder Albert. Al was one of ours."

Doubt flickers behind Danny's eyes as he takes all of this in. He hadn't mentioned Albert by name, so they knew something, but he wasn't convinced. "I don't believe you. Albert is - " having to stop and correct himself feels like a stab in his heart, "- was - a good man. He never would have fallen in with something like this."

Terry gives a short, impatient sigh. "I don't have a lot of time, so I'm gonna make this brief. Al was a good man. One of the best. But you obviously didn't know him as well as you think you did. He's worked with us for years. He was an integral contact at Reuger Arms - how else do you think we ended up with all these?" he says, gesturing toward the crates around them.

"So you're thieves as well as murderers. You're not being very convincing," retorts Danny.

Terry's tone abruptly changes and his eyes narrow. "I'll be honest with you Danny, I don't have a lot of interest in convincing you. I don't need you. But I do need the Floor Manager at Reuger. Threats aren't how I wanna do this, but I am pressed for time. I could tell you to join us or we'll shoot you where you sit, try again with the next manager. But I think that just like Albert, you see the cracks running through this world. I could give the whole grand speech, but I think you know how badly our government is failing us. They treat us like rats in a cage. The elites sit in their protected communities while the populace starves. They've stolen our freedom, and we're fighting to get it back. Al saw that and he did his part. He'll be sorely missed. If you wanna get back at the people who killed him, look no further than the authorities that are feeding you the 'terrorist' narrative.

"Al found something this morning - something important, world-altering - and they killed him to get to it. Then they erased the evidence by levelling a city block. Believe me or not, the choice is yours, but here's the offer: Join us and take over Albert's position funnelling us weapons. In return, your family will be under our protection, and you'll be forewarned of our missions so's you can stay clear. Take it or leave it, but if you leave it, we'll need to replace you at Reuger. We'll do our best to relocate you and your family, but we make no promises. You have the weekend to consider."

With that, Terry stands, nods to Denzil, and walks away. Denzil flips something over to Danny. As he catches it, he recognizes it as one of the eye patches they are all wearing. "Alright Danny Boy," Denzil begins as he swings his feet back to the floor and stands in a fluid motion, "this is a magnetic eye patch. If you want to hide your implant signal, wear that and you'll go blank. Toss it on and come with us."

They return to the black van and Danny climbs into the back, where he notices that the windows and passage to the cab are covered, making visual confirmation of the route they will take impossible. Denzil climbs in after him, followed by the young woman with the afro from earlier, who fixes Danny with a disapproving look. Danny puts faith in the mental map he made earlier and turns to pay attention to what Denzil is saying.

"Right - this here is LaToya. She'll be your main contact. When you've made a decision, dial the number saved in this. Know how to use it?" he asks, tossing Danny an ancient-looking flip phone. Even in his youth, these had been obsolete, but he's pretty sure he can operate it. He flips it open and manoeuvres the arrow on the tiny screen until it hits the 'Contacts' option. Only one number appears, and he shows the phone to Denzil while miming hitting the 'call' button. Denzil seems pleased. "Atta boy Danny. Let's see if those brains of yours hold up. Put your patch on before you even take this phone out. Give LaToya your answer and she'll give you your instructions."

The van grinds to a halt and Danny hears the driver get out. When he turns back to Denzil he finds himself staring down the barrel of a pistol. Denzil pushes it gently but firmly against Danny's forehead and continues speaking quickly in a hushed tone. "Now listen to me very closely Danny Boy. The large man who was driving - you met him earlier - his name is Sean. You won't see him, but I want you to know he is watching you. Talk to anyone about this, and he'll kill you. Try to turn us in, he'll kill you. Try to run away, he'll kill you. Do anything too far out of the ordinary and - can you guess?" he asks, pushing the barrel into Danny's forehead a little harder.

"He'll kill me," Danny replies carefully.

"Good lad, there's that big old brain of yours."

The side door flings open to reveal Sean, who takes one look at the situation and snaps sharply, "Denzil! Put it away, now!"

"Awww, Seany-baby, you worry too much. It's not even loaded!" he retorts, wagging the magazine for the pistol in his other hand. Sean, moving quicker than Danny expected someone of his size to be able to, snatches the gun from Denzil. He ushers Danny out of the van, where he can see that they have returned him to his car. It's not until he is back in the driver's seat and the van has pulled out of view that Danny finally breathes a sigh of relief. It's been an eventful day, to say the least.

Danny removes his eyepatch and his HUD flickers back into view. Glancing at his clock, he curses under his breath. At this rate, he'll never make it to the hospital on time taking the long way around on the highways. He'll have to drive through a section of the Heights; a more direct route, but a much less pleasant drive. Pulling out of the alley, his

mind pores over the things he has learned and what he is being asked to do. There are no easy answers. No matter what choice he makes, he'll be putting his family in danger.

When he arrives at the checkpoint for the nearest entrance to The Heights, they scan his biometrics and upload the unquarantined areas to his map. Segregating areas where pandemic-potential viruses take hold has become the government's go-to control response. Today, he's lucky, green zones light up a pretty direct path to his destination. The last thing he needs right now is to be recorded in an infected zone, forcing him into quarantine as well. He speeds along the dirty streets as Terry's words echo through his mind. He sees the rampant poverty, the scavengers hawking the wares they have collected or stolen, bartering for other goods they need. Few citizens in the Heights have the means to acquire an implant (at least legally), and so they have developed their own economic systems based around barter and trade. The shabby, dilapidated buildings rise on all sides with makeshift walkways and scaffolds criss-crossing the spaces between them. Dirty, poverty stricken people pack the streets, shambling through their miserable lives, huddling around improvised fireplaces and finding what shelter they can from the drizzling rain. Danny notes more than a few Cykes dotting the crowds, although now spotting someone in an eyepatch takes on an extra meaning. Who knows who might be a secret rebel rather than an unfortunate?

As he nears his chosen exit point, he watches a Cyke suddenly leap from the shadows of an alleyway, bringing a knife up to cut the bag from someone's shoulder. A cry goes up, but the Cyke only makes it a few steps before a police drone hovers into view and fires a single shot. The Cyke stumbles and falls, spilling the contents of the stolen bag everywhere. The flow of traffic moves Danny away from the scene before he can take it all in, but from the reactions of the people all around this isn't an unusual occurrence. These people aren't citizens. They're prisoners. Residents of the Heights can't leave of their own accord, they're trapped in a special hell of their own government's making. Of course he's always known that what's happening is wrong, but what could he do about it? Now, all of a sudden, it seems the answer to that question might have changed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Emily Finn

Emily rushes to her next patient. The hospital has been overloaded ever since the attack this morning. She's been going non-stop as person after person is brought through the ER doors with injuries varying from smoke inhalation to the kind of injury you'd only expect to find in a war zone. Emily did her time as a military medic in her youth, but she'd hoped to never have to deal with this kind of triage again after getting out. Unfortunately, it has never really stopped in all these years.

It doesn't help that one of the other nurses on shift disappeared for a phone call half an hour ago and hasn't yet returned. It's not like April to shirk her duties and an unsettling feeling has begun to sit heavily in Emily's stomach as the minutes have stretched on. She's increasingly worried about her friend. Their replacement shift has already arrived, but with the chaos of the situation Emily has stuck around to get them all up to speed. Once she finally finishes her rounds and logging the requisite files, she clocks out of the hospital's Network feed and goes searching for April.

It's not long before Emily finds her in the chapel where she regularly goes to pray. Although Emily isn't religious, she knows how much peace it brings to April. However, as she walks down the aisle of pews it's immediately clear that her friend isn't at peace, in fact, she isn't okay at all. She doesn't respond at first; it's not until Emily is crouched beside the pew where she sits, despondent and unmoving, that she finally turns to acknowledge Emily's concerned gaze.

There's a distant, desperate look in her eye, and her mouth opens a few times to attempt a failed vocalization before sound finally comes out. "It's Albert...." she begins, but her voice cracks almost immediately. The unbearable task of speaking the words aloud breaks the dam that has been holding back the flood of emotions. Her eyes brim with tears that begin to stream silently down her face. "The explosion...they said he - " is all she's able to croak out before an anguished wail escapes and she collapses into Emily's arms.

"Oh god, April..." Emily begins, unsure of what to say. As she hugs the weeping April into her shoulder, Emily quickly logs into the hospital Network again to frantically scan the patient database. No Shanaghans were admitted, and so she flicks over to a news feed. Before long, a list of the confirmed deceased victims of the terrorist attack scrolls by. She has to read it three times before her brain will fully absorb the reality. Albert's name is on it. She shuts down the display and hugs April even tighter.

Emily is expecting to find Danny waiting for them in the parkade. But it's still several minutes before she sees their battered old car rumble its way into the pickup zone. Danny's face is plastered with concern as he jumps out of the car, mouthing an apology to Emily for being late. It's clear that April, still sobbing uncontrollably into Emily's shoulder, is going to need some extra care. It's quickly decided that they will

pick up April's 13-year-old son, Clint, and that the Shanaghans will come and stay with the Finns for a while. At the very least until things have somewhat settled down.

When they finally all make it back to the house, April and Clint shut themselves away to mourn together for a while, leaving Emily and Danny feeling absolutely helpless. When they had broken the news to Clint, he'd gone into protection mode for his mother. It's clear that he is putting up a front of bravado and suppressing his own emotions. While Emily is impressed with his ability at such a tender age to step up and take care of his broken mother, she knows he is hurting just as much inside and that it will need to come out sooner or later.

Luckily, the next day there is a break from work and school for all of them. Danny has always been fantastic with kids, so Emily asks him to spend some time with Clint to try and coax him out of the emotional shell he is wrapping around himself. April and Emily both need a distraction and so take a trip to the nearest supply depot. During the drive, April stares wordlessly out of the car window. Emily doesn't quite know whether she *should* say anything, let alone what she *would* say. After what seems like an eternity of silence, April is the one to finally speaks up.

"We see families lose people they love every day. You'd think it would make it easier, or would make it....make sense, somehow....but you never really believe it's going to happen to you." She falters for a moment before turning desperately toward Emily. "They haven't found his body, you know. What if....I don't know Em, it must sound like I'm losing it but what if he's not gone? Maybe he's just trapped, or he got taken to another hospital? Maybe they'll find him and he'll be okay!"

"April," Emily interjects gently, "You're not losing it. It's perfectly natural to feel this way. All we can do right now is deal with all this day by day." For a moment Emily thinks that she detects a flash of anger on her friend's face, then it resumes its emotionless mask, and she returns to staring out the window. Emily's heart aches for April and Clint, and for the loss of Albert, but she knows she has to remain strong. If April needs to be mad at her then that's something she'll take on as well, but she doesn't think that it's helpful to indulge April's hopeless flights of fancy. Albert's implant signal went dark at the epicentre of the explosion. *As much as April might want it to be true*, Emily thinks, *miracles don't exist. Al's gone, and now I have to focus on getting my friend through this awful time.*

The supply depot looms into view. The fortified gate keeps any unwanted guests out - by which the government means those unable to pay, of course. Emily's implant grants them access without any issue and they park in the secure lot. She's been worried that the recent attack would mean that the depot would be overrun with people trying to stock up, but to her delight, it doesn't seem too busy. The fortified outer gate surrounds the perimeter of the plaza, and the reinforced concrete walls of the actual depot nearly cover the old, weathered areas where the store's brand name used to be proudly displayed. The front entrance has another security gate, this time with armed

military guards. They are scanning the people in line with a handheld device. This extra precaution is unusual for everyday shopping trips, but after an attack, supply chains can't be too careful. When their turn in line comes up Emily scans through with no issue, but as April follows, the scanner makes a distinct beep, and the soldier holds her back.

"Sorry Ma'am, looks like there's an update on your file I need to confirm and authorize. Seems there's been a reduction in your allotment.....Ma'am?"

April looks back to see April on the verge of a meltdown. She's stopped responding to the soldier, and her eyes, which have begun to fill with tears, are focused far into the distance. She also appears to be having trouble breathing.

"Ma'am, I need to ask you to either comply or step out of line - "

"Excuse me soldier," Emily calls to grab his attention, skillfully turning him away from April, who is desperately trying to remain composed in public.

Emily meets the soldier's bright hazel eyes - eyes that surely have seen no more than nineteen summers, and forcefully whispers, "Please. The allotment was for her husband, she lost him in yesterday's attack."

The soldier hesitates as he considers the ramifications of ignoring procedure, but Emily can see that he is teetering on the edge of compliance. She decides to give him one final twist, "If you could just show an ounce of compassion and not make her do this today."

After one final beat of contemplation, the soldier leans in, "I lost my sister to a rebel attack a few years ago. Just make sure she authorizes the change before she comes back, yeah?"

Emily gives a warm smile of appreciation and mouths a 'thank you' as she guides April into the store with a sigh of relief. The actual shopping isn't particularly difficult. Emily and Danny are always careful to be creative with their allotment, buying the cheaper brands and food fundamentals rather than spending it on fancier items. Those with higher incomes can purchase larger allotments, but that has never been an option for them. Danny's promotion means that they might be able to, moving forward, but Emily has more tact than to pursue something like that with April around. She does, however, think to pick up a few bottles of wine. She forgoes a few other items to be able to afford it, but after everything that has happened, she's pretty certain it's the better choice. She had made sure to help her friend find her necessities before heading for her own, so by the time she finishes up, April is waiting for her outside. As she approaches, April spots her and rushes forward with a fearful look in her eye.

"Emily! Let's get out of here."

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"It's just....it's a bad feeling I guess, but on my way out I passed a guy going in. He....He *smelled*."

Emily's expression darkens. She would have double-checked April's meaning but the look on her face makes it very clear what she is suggesting. She doesn't just mean

that they smelled bad. She meant they smelled like the Heights, and there is only one way that someone who smells like the Heights would be inside the perimeter of the depot - rebels. The rebels often use the Heights as both cover, and a way to move unnoticed through the city. If there were rebels here, the two of them need to leave.

"April, get to the car, I should warn the guards," she says, but before she takes two full steps an explosion rocks the plaza. Immediately there are warning sirens blaring and gunfire erupting as rebel troops spill from a supply truck nearby. Emily drops everything and grabs April, sprinting back to the safety of the depot, where the heavy security gate has begun to lower like a portcullis. The guards return fire and form a defensive perimeter as people stream past them into apparent safety. One of the soldiers punches a button on the wall and two drones stationed at the perimeter whir to life, seeking targets as soon as they achieve liftoff. However, before they even fully clear their docks, they are struck by a short-range EMP grenade. Emily has seen these weapons before, but it's always a shock to hear and see no explosion when they detonate. You simply feel the concussive electromagnetic pulse and watch all the electronics in the area fail simultaneously. If you're close your implant will flicker - too close and it will fry. The drones drift into each other as they fall, destroying themselves in a tangled mess.

The rebel troops advance, and quickly begin overwhelming the soldiers guarding the depot. Emily sees the young soldier with the hazel eyes take a bullet to the leg. After dropping to the ground, he desperately starts to crawl back toward the entrance, hoping to make it back in time. Emily has a fleeting urge to run out and drag him back, but she knows she'll never make it - the heavy gate is descending too quickly. The remaining military soldiers set up in defensive positions inside the gate. One of them looks panicked and tears open a pouch on his belt, retrieving a prepared syringe. Hesitating for just a moment, he stabs the needle into his leg and depresses the plunger, injecting himself with a light blue liquid. Instantly his pupils dilate and his face contorts into a strange, energetic expression. However, before he can act, rebel soldiers hidden among the crowd reveal themselves, while a few more slide in under the closing gate. In a stunningly brief moment, they have complete control over the situation, disarming the remaining soldiers and establishing their command.

A sharp cry for help drifts up from the security gate, and with horror, Emily realizes that the hazel-eyed soldier has made it halfway across the threshold but can no longer pull himself any farther; the gate has begun to close on him. A somewhat dashing rebel with tanned skin and a British accent quickly assumes command, and within seconds there are three rebels attempting to physically lift the gate, while a fourth accesses a nearby control panel. Ignoring her own safety, Emily rushes over, declaring her status as a nurse. The soldier had flipped onto his back while crawling, and now she cradles his head carefully as the gate fights the rebels to lower further into his abdomen. His

young eyes are wild with panic, and despite her own surging emotions, Emily steadies herself with finely tuned nursing instincts.

"What's your name soldier - don't look at them! Look at me, what's your name?"

"Whittock ma'am," came the strained reply. With each breath, he can bring in less and less air, and the door continues to lower. The straining rebels are slowing, but not stopping it.

"Alright Whittock, you hold on, we're getting you out of here," Emily says in an attempt to keep him calm.

"Ma'am? I think they shot me...I'm sorry..."

"Hush now, we'll have you out in just a second."

The rebel that has been at the control panel somberly approaches the British one who is in charge.

"Denzil, the door won't open again until it's fully closed. It's a failsafe, there's nothing I can do."

Denzil lets out a sigh and unholsters the gun at his hip. Catching this, Emily shifts herself protectively over Whittock, but Denzil leans in close to whisper in her ear. "It's doin' 'im a favour, Luv."

Emily knows the truth of the situation, but it makes her feel sick. Reluctantly, she backs up and covers her face as the shot rings out into the young shoulders forehead. The rebels release the door and there is a sickening crunch as it bisects the young man, spilling a rapidly spreading pool of blood that causes those nearby to avert their eyes as well.

Unfortunately, the soldier that had given himself the injection uses this as a distraction to leap forward, unsheathing a knife and grabbing Emily. Several bystanders scream, and Denzil spins to face them.

"That's it!!" screams the soldier, emphasizing his point by pressing the blade against Emily's neck. "All of you rebel scum, drop your weapons, NOW!"

Denzil doesn't drop his gun, but he puts his hands up in the air, calmly addressing the frenzied soldier. "Alright son, no one else needs to get hurt, let's not be crazy here, yeah?"

One of the other rebels calls over to Denzil, "Sir, look at his eyes, he's been Spiked."

"Shit," mutters Denzil under his breath. Emily has heard of Spikes. The military uses the injectable drug cocktail as a 'combat enhancer'. It sharpens all of the senses while numbing pain and giving an intense adrenaline burst. Unfortunately, it also leaves users unstable and difficult to reason with outside of a combat scenario. But the soldier makes a critical mistake. As Denzil approaches, he points the knife threateningly toward him, giving Emily a split second to react. She lightly grips the knife arm, concealing her intention, and then in one smooth motion pulls the arm forward while shoving her hips back and smashing the back of her head into her captor's face to break his balance.

She slips her small frame back and to the side underneath the knife arm, which she grips in both hands. Stepping behind him she sinks her bodyweight down, driving the knife into the soldier's leg. She scuttles backward to escape as he twists around in fury to reacquire her, roaring with rage, yet seemingly oblivious to the pain of the blade stuck into him. Luckily, Denzil uses this moment to close distance, flipping his pistol around to strike the soldier's temple with the butt of his gun. Even with the incredible force of the strike, the adrenaline coursing through the soldier's system keeps him up. The five strikes that immediately follow it, drop him to the floor.

Denzil orders some of the others to take the now unconscious soldier as well as the rest of the surrendered away for "deprogramming" - a phrase that gives Emily pause as he gallantly offers a hand to help her up. "That was mighty brave of you young miss. If you ever feel like joining the rebellion, we could use a firecracker like you."

Emily uses his hand to hoist herself up, whereupon she spits directly into his face. "You make me sick," comes her reply, dripping with venom. Denzil chuckles as he pulls a handkerchief out to dab the spittle away. He looks as though he is about to say something else to her, but instead just gives a polite nod and turns away.

"Alright lads, load it up, clock's ticking!" comes the command from Denzil, and the rebels spring into rapid action, stripping the depot of food and supplies. It has become a regular tactic of the rebellious factions - stealing the food out of the mouths of regular citizens to fuel their continued terrorism. Emily tears herself away from glowering at Denzil and returns to April to make sure she's okay. As Emily approaches, however, the security gate begins to rise once more and April springs into action, her nursing training taking over once the wounded outside come into view. Admiring her friend's resilience, Emily sprints to the car to retrieve a first aid kit while April begins triage on the most seriously wounded.

The scene is monstrous. Not only do dead and wounded soldiers from both sides litter the parking lot, but there are also several civilian casualties. With the sight of the dead and dying spurring her on, Emily patches into emergency services through her implant and is informed that both military and medical forces are already on their way. She urges them to hurry if they want to catch the rebels, who are frantically loading up the truck they came in. Denzil yells to be heard over the screams and moans of the injured, ordering his people to get the perimeter gate cleared of the debris from the crashed drones. Emily quickly scans the skyline, looking for other incoming drones. Despite all that has happened, it's only been a brief few minutes since the attack began. *These goddamn rebels are too efficient, she realizes, if backup doesn't arrive soon, they'll get away.*

April, in the meantime, has knelt beside a civilian who is bleeding heavily from a chest wound. A child stands next to him, wailing for his father to get up. Emily arrives with the first aid kit, but the young man is clearly struggling to breathe as he coughs up foamy blood. His eyes are wide with panic, and the breaths are coming shallower and

less frequently. April gives a subtle look to Emily that she implicitly understands - he's not going to make it, and the boy doesn't need to see this. Emily scoops the crying child up and walks a few steps away, attempting to distract him. He can't be more than six or seven, not much younger than her own son.

"Hey there little guy, what's your name?" she coos as she delicately brushes tears from his face. For half a second, she is tormented by a flash of the similar conversation she just had with poor Whittock, but she quickly blocks it from her mind to focus on the task at hand. Now isn't the time to process her own emotions.

"S...Samar..." is the choked reply from the boy. Emily walks him further away while April does her best to comfort the dying man.

"Hi Samar, that's such a nice name! I'm Emily. I know this is all very scary, but I need you to be a brave boy for me, okay?" Samar rubs his reddened face and manages a small nod. She approaches a group of unharmed civilians who are offering to help and reassures the young Samar that he'll be safe with them for a few minutes, giving him a light kiss on the head before turning back to the carnage behind her. If she can help it, no one else will lose a loved one today.

Meanwhile, the rebels have begun to scatter. The gate is now cleared and the truck is already on the move, even as the last supplies are being loaded. Denzil gives her a mock salute from the passenger side of the truck's cabin as it rumbles past her.

"Coward!!" she screams after him in frustration, but all he does is give her an infuriating wink, and then the truck is gone. The sound of incoming drones can be heard, and she hopes with every fiber of her being that those bastards will be caught before they can get away.

When the authorities finally storm the plaza the rebels are long gone. Both April and Emily ride with the injured to the hospital, silently acknowledging that doing their best to save these people is more important than their day off. As time speeds by in a blur of coding patients and emergency surgeries, Emily loses track of what happens to little Samar. She hopes he has been returned safely home, and even more so that he has a safe home to return to. It's well past dark by the time they are able to catch a ride back to the depot to collect the car. The area is cordoned off, but luckily an officer who had been one of the first on the scene recognizes her and lets them through, thanking them for their help. Their groceries are gone, of course, absconded by the rebels. But in the back seat of the car she finds a small parting gift: the bottles of wine have been safely tucked away. There's a notation tag that her implant picks up. When she activates it, there is a brief message digitally pinned to the bottles that reads, "You did everything you could, Firecracker - D". The words fill her fury, but she's too emotionally and physically exhausted to do anything more than swipe the note away, grateful that they will have something to numb themselves to the impact of the day.

When they finally arrive home, Emily can see that Danny is beside himself. He hugs her so tightly and for so long that she almost breaks down in his arms then and

there. The kids have already been sent to bed, so she cracks open the wine, which they drink much too quickly as they relay the story in enough detail to satisfy Danny's questions without unduly straining themselves. While he looks pretty composed through most of the telling, Emily knows her partner well enough to notice the storm of worry and anger hidden in the recesses of his eyes. Before too long, April passes out on the couch and Emily quietly leads Danny up to their bedroom, where she lowers the final emotional barrier that she has been holding up for April's sake. Unable to bear the weight of it all any longer, she collapses into him. He holds her and allows her to release as much of the hurt as possible into his loving arms. The exhaustion and wine mix in a manner that gives her a buzzing, lightheaded feeling, and soon the sobs and hugs develop into kisses and a passionate embrace. They cling to each other, driven by the knowledge of how close they came to the tragic night that many families are having at this very moment. They turn out the lights and make love with wild abandon, as if it's both the first and last time, until they collapse, sweaty and panting into the sheets.

Despite how tired they are, sleep doesn't take them right away. Danny stares at the ceiling. His mind is clearly occupied with some obscure thought. He turns to Emily and gently tucks a loose strand of her silky blonde hair behind her ear, delicately tracing her features with his finger before locking his own light brown eyes onto her dazzling blue ones.

"I nearly lost you today," he begins, finally voicing what had until now been unspoken.

"But you didn't."

"This time." He pauses for a few moments as he searches for just the right words to express himself. Emily beats him to it.

"What are we doing, Danny? It's not safe. None of this is safe....this is no way to raise a child."

He sighs. "I know, but what can we do? Where could we go? Our jobs are barely keeping us afloat as it is. The promotion will help a bit, but now I won't be around as much to help out here. We're stretched to the limit and I don't see a way out. If we're not careful we could end up lost in the Heights, like all those others. Or worse..." His words fail him and so Emily picks up where he left off.

"Remember when we were kids? The world seemed so full of promise. You could talk to someone on the other side of the world, and the idea of packing up and starting somewhere new wasn't some pie-in-the-sky dream. There was fun and adventure to be had! Now we're all just so....stuck, and...powerless to *do* anything about it..." She shifts onto her side so that Danny can snuggle in to spoon her. And so that he can't see the new tears that have begun to form. He squeezes her tightly - the only response he can think of to comfort her as they take a moment to dream about a world that never came to be.

Comforted by the protective nature of his form curled around her, she finds herself thankfully able to push the horrific images of the day from her mind enough to let sleep begin to take her. His whispering voice is the last thing she hears before the darkness overtakes her, "Stuck, maybe. But not powerless. There's always *something* that can be done. And I promise you I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

INTERLUDE

Atherton, California

Noah Levi

"Hey, boss, ready to change the world?" Vanessa Hemp calls out, her continental European accent reverberating down the mahogany-lined hallway. Barely able to contain his excitement, Noah Levi marches toward her, arm-in-arm with his wife, Adriana.

"I've been ready for a long time my friend. Shall we?" he replies, gesturing toward the double doors ahead of them. Vanessa has always been someone that Noah can count on to come through when he really needs something done. He considers her his right hand, and she, perhaps more than anyone else, grasps the scale of what he is trying to achieve. He suspects that she's almost as passionate about it as he is. Though she is physically somewhat plain-looking, her sharp, fitted business suit and authoritative bearing stand as a stark contrast to Noah in his more casual (though expensive) jeans, t-shirt, and leather jacket, as well as Adriana in her flowing summer dress. To look at the three out of context you might incorrectly assume that Vanessa is the one in charge. In fact, most of the people in the conference room on the other side of the doors are there as a direct result of Vanessa's recruiting efforts. Through her position as the Executive Director of the Levi Foundation - the company through which Noah pursues his philanthropic efforts - she has been able to socialize with philanthropists, scientists, and forward thinkers, vetting them for the unique qualities that Noah requires to make his vision work.

Adriana, on the other hand, has the ability to capture the attention of almost anyone as she enters a room, and so Noah gives her the central position while he and Vanessa swing the heavy doors wide. As usual, her beauty and poise, accompanied with the sudden activity, cause all eyes to focus on the incoming trio, and the low rumble of chatter quickly dies out. Noah has never tired of seeing the looks of delight in people's eyes as his wife walks into a room. He isn't much of a socialite himself and he is always grateful for the heavy lifting Adriana does for him in that department.

The conference room feels like a breath of fresh air after being cooped up in his dusty old study. He's grown sick of spending time there, a room which he finds to be a constant reminder of his privileged upbringing and all the trappings that come with it. Its walls mock him with fancy frames containing various awards, news clippings, and the diploma from the prestigious private school he attended - despite his best efforts. He'd deliberately flunked entrance exams, but as usual his father had swung the mighty weight of his bank account and with a generous 'donation', Noah had been admitted anyway. The one good thing to come out of it was meeting Adriana and his core group of closest compatriots. They'd been meeting in secret for years to discuss Noah's theoretical undertaking, and had even taken several preparatory steps, but today is an

historic day for Noah. A culmination of sorts that will take things from the world of "might be", to the world of "is". No more will it be simply dreaming and preparing for a potential future, the time has finally come for action. Today is the first *official* meeting of The Free World Project - something he considers the most important project in all of human history.

Scanning around the room Noah catches sight of quite a few faces he isn't familiar with, but finds relief in the sight of his inner circle. There's tech genius Simon Craig, and his wife Karine - a true wonder in the field of medicine. Sometimes people don't take Simon seriously, with his dishevelled clothing, messy, curly brown hair, paunch-belly and hunched shoulders. But to underestimate him is a big mistake. In his youth he had been a wonderkid in robotics and AI - in fact most of the drones in use today are at least partially based on his designs. He'd also been a special project manager at NASA for many years until the satellite grid was lost. Now he spends his days working with Noah, developing new tech and operating systems for The Free World. Together with Karine, they have developed some of the most advanced medical technology that Noah has ever imagined, let alone seen. Although the pair have been friends with he and his wife since high-school, Noah still finds their level of intelligence somewhat frightening.

Next to them is a wiry bald man in his sixties with small but piercing blue eyes. This is Ryan Addison, one of the foremost leaders in advanced horticultural techniques. Though to be honest, no matter how many innovations he develops, nothing makes Ryan happier than a basic trowel and a patch of good dark soil.

Andy Jones gives a goofy wave from further down the row, bringing a smile to Noah's face. He dresses with a similar aesthetic to Noah, but stands out with his shaved head, muscular frame, and numerous tattoos. At thirty-eight he is on the younger side of the present group, though Noah has never met a more knowledgeable contractor and engineer when it comes to new and sustainable systems for plumbing, power, and housing.

Feeling his nervousness starting to grow as he reaches the podium where he is to speak, Noah takes heart in seeing his oldest friend, Thomas Lincoln, giving him an encouraging nod. Next to him, his wife Zoe, a world-class chef and nutritionist, flashes Noah two excited thumbs up.

He looks out at the gathering of some of the best minds and biggest wallets he has been able to accrue. The presence of so many additional people to the usual group has clearly stirred up considerable interest in what he is about to say. He takes a deep breath and begins to speak in his easy-going, persuasive manner.

"Thank you all for joining me here, on what I hope will be a momentous day for us all. As most of you know by now, a portion of us gathered here have been discussing a project for many years now. A project that will transform civilization and bring us in harmony with each other, and the world around us. A project that can bring about the

end of the dehumanizing struggle most people face on a day-to-day basis. The Free World Project."

Noah knows just how to use his phrasing and tone to grab the audience, and the applause that breaks out here lets him know that they are coming along with him on this ride. "Imagine a world free from the oppressive power structures that have governed human history. A world where the needs of all are met and the talents of all are allowed to shine. A world of creativity, peace, harmony, and progress. The whims of capitalism have been the driving force behind human progress for so long, but we have seen what the Old World has to offer: division, war, poverty, disease, and death. We have progressed to a point where these outdated ideas are now holding us back. With the advancement of new technology, the time has come to breathe new life into society. To let new ideas flourish. To move forward with a new mindset; one that puts the survival of the species first, rather than the individual. As a collective, it's imperative that we move past the accumulation of personal wealth as a marker for success.

"The Free World offers us all that chance, and while it may sound grandiose, the people in this room have all met to work towards a common goal: saving the world. In the world we wish to create – The Free World – No one needs to lose for everyone to win.

"The Free World offers us all that chance, and while it may sound grandiose, the people in this room have all met to work towards a common goal: saving the world. My friends, we have talked for long enough. The time for action is upon us. Each of you possesses a unique skill set that will help us build this new framework of society-"

"That's nice and all, Noah," comes an interruption from the end of the front row, "but we've been over this a hundred times. It's just not financially feasible. Even securing a proper location in America to build on is beyond our means, no matter how many richies you pull in." Ethan Thomas is the speaker; an old acquaintance of Noah and Adriana whose world view is about as diverse as his wardrobe. Which is to say, not very. Usually, an interjection like this would throw Noah off his groove, but today he is ready for it. Maybe even counting on it. A grin spreads across his face that he fights desperately to keep from looking smug as he speaks again.

"Ethan Thomas, everyone. Our resident architectural expert and cynic. Ethan, I would like to introduce you and the rest of our fine gathering to a very special person. Someone who shares our passion for change. Someone, coincidentally, with the resources to do something about it. Layla, would you come up here please?"

It's Layla that's made the difference. Adriana had found her, of course, social butterfly that she is, at a fundraiser. When she had brought the young, pale, unassuming young woman over, Noah had no way of knowing that she held the power to change not only his life, but potentially the fate of the planet.

Today, her bright red hair is accented nicely by prim, emerald coloured business attire, and she gives Vanessa a confidential wink as she hesitantly inches her way to the

front of the room. She busies herself adjusting her jacket to avoid having to make too much eye contact with the crowd. Noah gestures toward her and smiles warmly. "Let me introduce you all to Layla Keller, the new Public Liaison Officer between the Levi Foundation and Keller Industries. Yes, *that* Keller Industries. Layla is, in fact, the daughter of Swiss trillionaire Dario Keller, and she has some exciting news for us."

Layla takes a breath to compose herself and smiles broadly at the gathering. "Hello! It's so nice to finally meet you in person. Noah has told me so much about you. I feel like we'll all be the best of friends before we know it."

Noah isn't sure if it's due to her accent or her nervous disposition, but the crowd is awkwardly silent. "Anyway, I told my father all about your endeavour, and I am here to announce that he has given the green light for the philanthropic arm of Keller Industries to help fund The Free World Project!"

Clearly, she had expected the kind of applause that Noah seemed to command effortlessly, as she finishes with a big flourish of her hands. Instead, a rumble of uncertain murmurs ripple through the crowd. Sensing her losing them, Noah motions to Vanessa, who presses a button on an ancient-looking digital projector while Adrianna lowers the lights. A large square of light appears on the front wall of the room and the murmurs dissipate into happy gasps of nostalgia as everyone shifts to gaze fondly at the quaint technology from their youths; before implants changed everything.

While a holographic display might have been more thrilling, the defunct old tech is a necessity down here. Noah's had the conference room retrofitted to block Network signals so that big brother can't eavesdrop. He considers his expansive estate and it's mansion to be gaudy and frivolous, and many times has fought his parents on the validity of keeping it to "maintain appearances". But he has to admit that it's proved quite useful for his somewhat clandestine activities. While their discussions aren't technically seditious, the gatherings are often in violation of lockdown orders, and you can't be too careful with today's government. They have a tendency to hunt down opposition to the status quo, and especially now that things are accelerating, he doesn't want to take any chances. He doesn't like to think of himself as a paranoid person, but when you're trying to change the world....better safe than sorry.

Noah uses the small remote in his hand to click to his first slide - a title page for The Free World Project - before initiating a smattering of applause that he directs toward Layla. "Thank you, Ms. Keller! Now, if you'll please direct your attention to our little presentation over here, I hope to show you all why Ethan has nothing to worry about."

The projection changes to a vista of a beautiful island surrounded by blue seas. "This is the island of Brač, off the coast of Croatia. Once inhabited, the now abandoned town of Supetar boasts much of the infrastructure we need for a home base while we build. I've personally visited the site and I am here to tell you that in my humble opinion - it's perfect for us."

"Okay, I see where this is going," interrupted Ethan again, "look Noah, you know we all agree with the ideology of the project, but I've had enough of these fundraisers. I don't care how close Keller's donation has gotten you, I'm tapped. We all are. And even if we were able to afford the island, how are we possibly going to then afford the costs of building and implementing everything?"

Noah smiles pleasantly. "You misunderstand my friend. I'm not here to ask you for money. In fact, I'm here to offer you the opportunity to never have to spend another cent. You see this island? We already own it. When I say we have the backing of Dario Keller, I want you to fully understand what I mean. We've got everything we need to break ground tomorrow. And not just at Supetar," he clicks forward through the subsequent slides as he speaks. "We've got private property in Cuba, Iceland, Gotska Sandon, and Brazil - all bought and paid for. I'm sure you've been wondering why there are so many new faces here today. Well, the people in this room represent the core founding members of the first *five* hubs of The Free World."

There is a stunned silence in the room as everyone processes what Noah just said. Layla smirks from where she stands at the podium. "Did you think my father another rich fool tossing scraps to various causes willy-nilly, Mr. Thomas? I assure you my father and I researched your group thoroughly before attaching ourselves. We recognize that this is more than just a pipe dream for Noah. The plans you've all put together are incredible. Each hub specifically self-sufficient and integrated into the surrounding environment with the utmost care for harmony. The imaginative ways you've developed and advanced technology to supply all citizens with everything they need. But especially the non-hierarchical structures entirely separated from a capital-based system altogether. This was the final aspect that convinced my father that this was the project he has been looking for. No one becomes a trillionaire without the exploitation of others, Mr. Thomas. My father acknowledges this, and he is determined to fix the mistakes of the past using the power those mistakes gave him. The one gap you have had between conception and realization all these years is the capital. We intend to close that gap, so that no one will ever have to face it again."

Things move quickly after Layla finishes speaking. The members split into the groupings of their respective hubs and begin to address the individual issues standing in the way of each of their establishment. The Supetar hub is the furthest along due to it being the basis from which all the designs found first purchase. This allows Noah and Simon to circle through the remaining hubs, problem solving the modifications required for the modular housing units, power generation, food production, and sanitation in each of their locations. The energy in the room is buzzing, and even Ethan can't resist energetically contributing to the conversation, a cynic no longer. Noah steps to the side, taking it all in. He beams as he thinks about what is to follow. If all goes according to plan, no one will ever again be forced to work themselves to death trying to stay alive. No one will ever again be denied a life of their own choosing. It's been his dream for so

long that the prospect of it suddenly springing to life in front of him is almost overwhelming.

Adriana sidles up to him as he gazes at the group they brought together, busily collaborating to collectively solve the world's problems - finally empowered to do so. One of her hands slips into his and she gently cups his face with the other, turning it so that she can look him in the eyes. Staring into the windows of her soul, Noah thinks about the first time he met her. He'd been just as captivated by those eyes then. At the time she had been a cheerleader, a grade A student, and one of the most beautiful and popular girls in school. She could have chosen anyone to spend her time with, but she'd shown her secret rebellious side to Noah, who basked in the opportunity to buck the system. Together they had organised protests, staged disruptive sit-ins, and generally disappointed their parents until, with tooth-grinding reluctance, they eventually gave their consent for Adriana to become Mrs. Noah Levi. Her support throughout the years had meant more to him than she could ever know.

"You did it Noah. I'm so proud of you," she says gently, pressing her finger to his lips as she sees him beginning to object. "I know, I know, it was a team effort. Of course it was. But this is your dream. You started it all, you kept it going all this time, and now - it's happening. You did it. You really did it!"

He takes her in with a heartfelt smile and squeezes her hand, then looks back over the hubbub filling the room. "Not yet, but we're finally on our way."

CHAPTER FIVE

Washington D.C

Terry Myson

"We're finally on our way!" comes the shout from one of Terry's soldiers as they slam the back of a truck they've been loading closed. Terry nods, checking off a note on an old-school paper pad he is carrying around. He pats the hood of the truck, which begins to lumber out of the underground garage that contains their temporary base. Things have been increasingly busy since Denzil returned with the supplies raided from the depot, and the scene before him would appear to be chaos to anyone without Terry's finely tuned strategic mind. Every few moments another soldier appears to give him a report on some obscure instruction. Keeping the elements of the rebel activities segmented helps protect their secrecy, but it makes Terry's workload exponentially heavier as he juggles a hundred different operations at any one time. He's used to the chaos though; perhaps he even revels in it. Growing up as an army brat he grew comfortable on bases with high activity levels, and his own time in the military had only sharpened his leadership skills. Now he is intent on using those skills to help people, rather than hurt them.

In the middle of the hustle and bustle, Denzil materializes to hand him an updated inventory. He can see that the raid went even better than anticipated. The loss of life is well within his personally-set acceptable level, although he hates that he has to maintain one, and the supplies that they've recovered will keep the rebellion stocked and hungry families fed for a good few weeks.

"This is good work, Denzil. Well done," he offers, giving Denzil a rare, but warm smile. Terry's father had always been unfailingly strict and withholding of affection; an attempt to shape Terry into a 'strong, manly, capable man.' And he succeeded, Terry is all of those things. But even with his stoic demeanor he wants his people to know when he is proud of them.

"All good, boss man. Just doing my job. When do yo-" Denzil trails off as his face adopts an almost whimsically surprised expression. Terry turns to follow his eyeline and is shocked to see, just a few steps away, Danny Finn striding confidently across the floor. Terry has no idea how he found them, but he is certainly happy to see him. Danny's face gives a very certain impression that the feeling isn't mutual. Terry opens his mouth to offer a word of greeting, but before he can get anything out, Danny swings a solid fist without slowing his momentum at all, catching Terry completely off guard and striking him with a stinging blow across the face that sends him stumbling away.

"You son of a bitch!" Danny screams, catching the attention of most of the bystanders. "You knew! You fucking knew about the attack and you didn't warn me!" Almost before the end of his sentence Danny has moved to strike Terry again but his arm is caught by a much bigger one. Sean Torres, having marked Danny as dangerous

from when he drove him out earlier, has a hold of him in his vice-like grip. Terry Sean Torres, who Danny briefly notes as the driver from their previous encounter, has a hold of him in his vice-like grip. Terry recovers from the initial strike and turns, with no small amount of shock, to see Danny twist his body expertly out of the much larger man's control. Sean looks appropriately shocked to see it himself and releases a cry of warning as Danny lunges toward Terry once again. Suddenly Danny stops mid-stride, arm cocked for another strike. Staring at Terry's face, the colour drains slightly from his own. Terry knows that look. He reaches up, but already knows what he will find - his eyepatch has been knocked completely off his face, exposing him.

"You...you're a..." Danny starts, but has to blink and take a second look at the visage that has caught him off guard. Terry's face is already covered in scars, but with everyone wearing the patches to hide their Network signal, it's clear that Danny hadn't been prepared to see the gaping hole where Terry's eye once sat. Terry gives a chuckle at Danny's shock and bends to pick up his patch from the ground.

"So now you know. Yeah, I'm a Cyke. But I recommend you be very careful what you do and say next, Sean doesn't take kindly to hostile intruders." Terry motions subtly behind Danny, who turns to see the barrel of a gun levelled directly at his head, a furious Sean standing behind it, finger on the trigger. "It's ok Sean, I'm sure Danny just came to talk, isn't that right?"

Off to the side, Denzil bursts into a fit of giggles, unable to contain himself. For some reason he finds the whole situation hilarious. "Down boy!" he calls to Sean between spasms of laughter. "I hardly think one unarmed man in the middle of our base is a threat, old chap! Don't mind him Danny," he leans conspiratorially but speaks loudly enough for all to hear, "Cassanova over here's just a bit of an over-protective guard dog."

Sean shoots Denzil a withering look, receiving a mischievous wink in return, and then holsters his pistol and steps around Danny to keep him from any more surprise attacks.

"That's enough Denzil," Terry says in a low voice, and Denzil sighs heavily, rolling his eyes. "Danny, how did you find us?"

"Did you really think you were that well-hidden? If you don't want to be found, don't bring someone to your super-secret hideout." Terry considers this for a moment, the gears in his mind cranking out a new conclusion. Leaning in close to Sean, he whispers some instructions in his ear. Sean looks hesitant, but Terry knows he is a man who follows orders. He gives Danny one final stare, as if to warn him that he's keeping an eye on him, and then dashes off, shouting orders this way and that. "Danny, walk with me," says Terry, who begins to stalk across the garage heading for a doorway near the back. Both Danny and Denzil fall into lockstep with him. "It was stupid of you to

come here Danny. The whole point of having secret insiders at Rueger is that no-one knows who they are. You exposed your face to too many people with your little stunt back there. Denzil, who's on watch duty?"

"LaToya," Denzil replies without hesitation. Terry pauses in his stride and considers Danny for a second before giving a non-committal grunt and ushering them all through the doorway into a small make-shift office area. He leans against a small desk and gives Danny a scrutinizing look-over before continuing.

"LaToya's one of our best trackers. I'm surprised you gave her the slip and got in here unnoticed. You continue to impress, Danny Finn - I'm hoping you've come here with some good news for me."

Danny explodes on Terry, "Good news!? You've got a hell of a nerve asking me for good news after you didn't warn me about that attack. My wife was there goddamnit! You nearly got her killed!"

"Ah shit. I'm sorry Danny, I really am. But we told you that protection and warning about attacks comes after you join. Not before. I understand that you're angry, but you're angry at the wrong person."

"How dare you. How fucking dare you! Do you think this is a game? This is my family, and you knew she was there! You knew, and this asshole," he gestures toward Denzil. "Thinks that it's a funny little gesture to leave her a couple bottles of wine? Why? Just to fuck with my head?"

Denzil's jaw drops as he makes the mental connection. "No way. No freaking way! Danny boy, that's your wife? The cute, blonde firecracker with a bigger set of balls on her than most men?"

Danny looks taken aback for a second. "Well, yeah. That's a crude, but accurate description. And by the way, you're lucky it's not you I came looking for after she mentioned the 'charming Brit' leading the operation. You're telling me you didn't know who she was?"

"She called me charming eh?" Denzil replies with an impish grin. "Danny boy, it's not always about you. That's a hell of a woman you've married. I was impressed by, and truly grateful for how she handled things back there. The wine was a thank you for her, not a message to you, I swear it."

The air seems to go out of Danny a bit. "Ok, so you didn't know it was her. You still knew the where and when, and you deliberately withheld that from me. I can't forgive you for that. Not when you needlessly put her life in danger just to feed your precious rebellion."

Terry cocks his head slightly. "What is it you think we're doing here Danny? Do you really think that we're just taking what we want for ourselves?" He pauses and gives Danny a hard look. "No. That's not what we're about. We're not fighting just to fight. We're here to try to make the world a better place. The vast majority of the supplies we liberate go directly to the people that are being kept from them. The government doesn't hate us because we've beaten them in a few battles and make life difficult for them. They hate us because we show people that life doesn't have to be this way. They'll do anything to make us seem like the bad guys just so they can hold on to the scraps of power they have left, and it's the people who always suffer. How is anyone supposed to feed a family these days Danny? Not people like you with cushy jobs, even though I know that's hard enough. But what about the people who the government says don't fit in their society. People like me?" Here Terry reaches up and removes his eye patch once more to emphasize his point. "I'm this way by choice. Once you've had a military implant put in, you can't just deactivate it. You can't just hide. You've got to tear it out by the roots. I made this choice. Not many people in my position did. I made it because I couldn't stand by and let them all suffer just so I could thrive. It's not right. You think you're so innocent? You work for a company that makes instruments of death and nothing else. That's what you have to contribute to this world. More death, more suffering - and deep down, you know it. I'm offering you a chance to be something more. A chance to do something about it. So, what do you say?" He extends his hand to Danny for a handshake, watching carefully as Danny's keen eyes dart to and fro. The calculating mind hiding behind them becomes apparent, and Terry wonders what it's considering. *Does he see how he operates as a cog in a machine that churns out nothing but suffering? Does he see the responsibility he bears for that participation in the system? Will he continue to myopically focus on the well-being of his own family while millions live in squalor under the boot of a government that doesn't care about them?*

As the suspended moment hangs for too long to be comfortable, doubt starts to creep into Terry's mind, until finally Danny sighs heavily and clasps the outstretched hand.

"Good man Danny Boy knew you had it in you," chimes in Denzil, grinning like a madman. Just then the door to the office bursts open, and a breathless LaToya comes barging in.

"I'm so sorry Terry, I lost him. I don't know what hap-" She stops mid-sentence as she takes in the scene in front of her. "Well, I'll be damned."

Denzil cackles and slaps her on the shoulder on his way out the door. "Don't take it too hard LaToya, he's a slippery fish, this one. You're gonna have your hands full."

Speaking of having your hands full, I've got some work to do." LaToya shakes her head in disbelief at seeing Danny here, clasping hands with Terry.

"Well damn, Danny. If you wanted in this badly you could've just asked!" she says with a laugh that Terry surprisingly joins before his stony exterior returns.

"LaToya, you are officially relieved of tracking duty. I'm reassigning you as Danny's handler. I'm willing to bet that this little slip up will mean you'll take greater care with him in the future, yes? Danny, keep a hold of the phone we gave you and report directly to LaToya. She'll brief you on what Albert's responsibilities were and keep you updated on any upcoming operations so that you can keep your family clear. She'll only be giving you the bare minimum of details to maintain security, but it'll be enough to keep you and yours safe. I'd appreciate it if you don't try to find us again. LaToya is your contact for a reason. We gotta keep our activity segregated so that no single cell can give us away completely. After what happened with Albert, Denzil uncovered a mole in our operation. We're not sure how much information was leaked, but we really need you to keep a tight lid on this, understand?" Danny gives a curt nod before Terry addresses the new handler, "LaToya, he's yours now. Take care of him."

"I will boss, I promise," she replies and gives Danny a wry smile. "Come on, I'll get you briefed up."

Terry watches as the new recruit follows LaToya out and doesn't relax until the door closes firmly behind them. "Thank god," he says to no one in particular. He likes Danny, and he didn't want to try and force his hand. Now, he finally feels like he is getting things back under control. The mole Denzil had uncovered had been a bitter pill to swallow, but he's a good interrogator. He'll find out how compromised they are.

After a long while there's a soft knock at the door and Sean lets himself in. He walks over to Terry with a gentle look in his eye. "Hey Ter-bear, how you doing?" he says as he slips an arm around him. Terry makes a sharp motion and steps out from under the arm to close the door. "Seriously? Are you still that ashamed?" says Sean, clearly hurt.

"Sean, babe, we've been over this. I'm not ashamed of you. I love you, please remember that. But you're also my number two, and I can't have the soldiers thinking you've got that position because of our relationship. They need to respect you for the work you do, or they won't acknowledge your authority when it counts."

"So you say. I hope that's all it is," Sean sighs, unconvinced. Concerned, Terry moves in and gives Sean a tight hug.

"You're an amazing partner Sean and I love you for that. But you're an even better soldier, and right now, just for a little while I need Soldier Sean. What's our status?"

Sean presses his lips tightly together in a momentary protest, but he knows the truth of what Terry is saying. "I can't believe how quickly this location was jeopardized. Who the hell is this Danny guy? You sure we can trust him?"

"Not entirely, but he seems like a good man. And I *am* sure that we need his access to Rueger. If Albert really found the antidote device, the fight might be coming to us sooner than we expected. What has Denzil found out so far?"

"That's one cold motherfucker, I can tell you that. The screams are unnerving the soldiers and he keeps taking breaks from the interrogation, coming out and letting everyone see the bloody knife. Doesn't seem to bother him at all."

"I know. He's doing that on my orders."

"Seriously? Why?" Sean asks. Terry takes a deep breath. He doesn't like letting Sean see this side of him, but he needs him to understand.

"When I was a kid, there was this group of older boys at school. They were the worst kind of bullies. They took what they wanted, and tortured kids half their size just for fun. My father had forbidden me from fighting, so me and my friends tried to ignore it. One day I saw one of my close friends with them, picking on some nerdy kid who couldn't defend himself worth a damn, and that's when I knew that I had to do something. They had too much power, and to keep *himself* safe, my friend had joined them. I singled out the leader of the bullies and beat him to a bloody pulp. Put him in the hospital. Then I found my friend on the playground and without a word I beat the shit out of him too. I lost friends over it, sure, but I never saw another one of them with the bullies. 'Cause they knew I'd come for them. I didn't try to hide it from my father. I marched right home and told him straight up what I'd done and why. He looked at me for a long time. I was sure he was going to put me in the hospital right beside the others, but he just nodded. He knew the necessity of what I had done. He grounded me for a year, but even so, that was the first time I ever felt that my father was proud of me.

"If you let one of your own join the bullies, you show them that they can make themselves safe there. It's harsh, I know. But I need to let everyone know that joining the enemy is not going to make them safe. 'Cause I will come for them and make them regret it. Al was a good man. An innocent man. He's dead because I obviously didn't make it clear that defecting is not an option."

Sean's face is placid, but internally he's horrified. "Terry....Albert wasn't your fault. Whatever your father taught you, what Denzil is doing out there...it's not right. It can't be who we are." He cups Terry's face in his hands and looks deep into his eyes. "Look at me, babe. Don't let them turn you into a monster. If we act like them, then we've got no right to fight them."

Terry fights to keep tears from welling up as he considers Sean's words. The words of this man that gives him so much love and offers a path he desperately wants to walk. "Sean, you know I respect your opinion, but we need to know what they know..." His mind races as he tries to come up with a better answer. Sean's eyes plead with his own

and he realizes he has to make a decision about what type of leader he wants to be. He doesn't need to live in the shadow of his father anymore. "You're right. Of course you're right. We can't be this. Tell Denzil to stop showboating and finish it quickly. We need to be gone anyway. I'll speak to the troops later and sort it all out. What's our ETA?"

Sean visibly relaxes and nods gratefully, "You're doing the right thing." He gives Terry a quick kiss. "We're in the wind in 20 minutes."

Terry nods back sternly, no longer the lover, but once more the leader.

"Make it 15."

CHAPTER SIX

(2045)

Washington D.C (The Heights)
Samar Behi

Samar Behi looks up from his little reading nook and notes the dimming evening light outside with surprise. He's stayed much longer than he intended. If he wants to make it to the shelter in time to pick up some food and medication before supplies run out, he's really going to have to hustle. He feels bad that he let time get away from him as he searched through the stacks of books. There was just so much to learn! In the years since his father's death at the supply depot during a terrorist attack, he's grown into a lithe young man of 10 years old. He has responsibilities now, there are people counting on him back at the crowded apartment deeper in the Heights. *Come on Samar, he chides himself, time to grow up and do your part.*

Quickly, he stows a couple of the more interesting volumes of the precious books he has found in this old, abandoned library into his much-repaired backpack. Slinging it over his shoulders he scrambles out of the fifth-storey window he uses to access the forgotten building, scanning the air for police drones. Getting caught breaking and entering is the last thing he needs now. Seeing a clear skyline, he leaps confidently across to the scaffolding on the other side of the alley and begins to scurry across the rooftops. His mother would cringe to see him flinging himself from building to building, but Samar knows that the 'high road' is much safer than the streets below.

As he slides and scrambles his way towards the shelter, he waves to the few people he sees, who by now are used to seeing the boy climbing past their windows and sliding down drainpipes. He's made a lot of friends this way. He's always quick with a smile, or a little gift of a trinket he's found to say thanks for letting him pass, and so most people are happy to see him as he dashes by. Before too long the bright sign that lights up his destination springs into view - The Levi Foundation. The building itself is one of the best kept in the whole of this sector. As a charitable organization, the shelter tends to ward away the more unsavoury elements in the area. They have private security, and everyone knows not to steal from them or cause too much trouble there. They operate as a shelter primarily, offering beds, food, and care to those most in need. They've tried for years to get Samar to come and stay with them instead of rushing off again, but he has people that depend on him. He can't just think of himself.

As he descends the final stretch before street level, he catches a glimpse of a beautiful green vehicle parked out front. His heart jumps at the sight and he breathes a sigh of relief. It means that Ms. Hemp is here today. Vanessa has always taken a particular interest in the bright young Samar. If anyone could convince him to stay at the shelter it would be her, or perhaps Mr. B - Samar's favourite volunteer. But the real

reason the idea of Vanessa being here fills him with relief is that she always brings with her extra supplies. His little family won't go hungry due to his tardiness, and there will almost certainly be some of the medicine he needs.

Deftly making his way into an open window, he stealthily makes his way down to the main lobby, playing his regular game with Mr. B. If he can sneak up on him without being caught, then he gets an extra treat. Samar is determined in his efforts, but even the few times he has been successful he feels that Mr. B has let him win deliberately; the man seems to have eyes in the back of his head. Today, as he peers down through a set of railings by the staircase, he sees Mr. B and Vanessa in the midst of a conversation. Vanessa has that un-placeable searching look in her eyes that he has seen so many times. He knows that she often comes here looking for something, some element in the people around her, but he's never been able to figure out what. Curiosity overtakes him as he begins to eavesdrop, even though he knows how rude it is. He catches the tail end of what Vanessa is saying.

"Neil, are you sure I can't convince you otherwise? I really feel like you'd be a perfect candidate." Hearing Mr. B referred to by such a familiar name feels weird to Samar. He's Mr. B, not *Neil*. He is just barely able to stifle a laugh while the conversation continues.

"Thank you, Vanessa, really. I appreciate the offer, but I think I can do more to help here, as a volunteer," he replies. Now Samar is truly intrigued by what they are discussing. He wonders where Vanessa wants to send him.

"I understand your hesitation, I really do, Neil. But at the very least come and attend the recruiting seminar. I think you might be really interested in what The Free World has to offer." Samar watches as Vanessa offers Mr. B a small data stick. Such devices aren't used in the outside world anymore, but here in the Heights they are quite valuable. Without the ability to connect to a Network, antiquated tech like this sells at a premium. Samar wonders why Vanessa would bother with such a thing when they both have implants. *It must be a secret*, he realizes, *something that Vanessa doesn't want going through the Network*. Samar files away the idea of a secret organisation named The Free World in his sharp mind, but he doesn't have much time to think about it before Mr. B continues.

"That's very kind of you Vanessa, I'll give it some thought. Preferably away from prying eyes. Come on down Samar, I know you're there you little sneak."

Samar's cheeks flush. "How did you know!?" he squeals as he bounds down the steps into view.

"You're not as quiet as you think you are, young man. Hasn't anyone ever taught you that it's rude to spy on people?" Mr. B responds with a sparkle in his eye.

"Old Bertie tells me all the time, but how's a kid supposed to learn anything when adults are so secretive, huh? What's The Free World?" he asks innocently. Vanessa

raises an eyebrow as she examines the boy that seemingly materialized from nowhere. She kneels down and gives him a serious look.

"Samar, it's good to see you. I'd ask if you're staying out of trouble but knowing you, that's a waste of time. Listen, I need you to do me a favour, ok? The Free World is a bit of a secret right now. It's important that you don't mention it to anyone."

"But what is it? Why is it a secret?"

Vanessa can't help but smile at his precocious attitude. "Well Samar, we're a group of people, and we're working to make the world a better place. Not like here at the shelter. This is good work, but it doesn't change much, does it?" Samar frowns and shakes his head. "Exactly. I can't even get one nosey little boy to stay here, safe off the streets," she says, lightly tapping him on the nose. "But The Free World is different. If we can pull it off, we might make it so no nosey little boys ever have to be on the streets again. That sounds good right?" Samar smiles and nods, and Vanessa goes on. "But we can't do that if the wrong people find out about it, so I need you to keep this just between us, okay? Promise?"

Samar twists his mouth around as he thinks, but having such an important secret is too good to resist. "Okay Vanessa, I promise. Maybe when I'm big enough, I can join you!"

Vanessa laughs and ruffles Samar's hair. "I bet you will little man. Now, what can we do for you today?" Samar reaches into his pocket and pulls out the scrap of paper with the list he was given on it. Mr. B and Vanessa both glance it over and Mr. B heads off to grab a package of foodstuffs. Vanessa gives a concerned look as she examines the end of the list.

"Samar, these are some pretty strong antibiotics you're requesting. What's going on?" Samar looks away, not wanting to say it out loud. "Samar, it's me. If I can trust you to keep my secret, you can trust me to keep yours, I won't get you in trouble."

Samar thinks for a moment and then decides that a secret for a secret is a fair bargain. "It's Raoul. He and his family live with us. He said he'd found a way to help everyone out, that he was gonna get work. But he had to get an implant....a black market one." Vanessa's face falls as she realizes what is going on.

"The implant isn't taking, is it?"

Samar shakes his head no, with his eyes downcast.

"Raoul's a good guy! He didn't mean to do anything illegal, he just wanted to help! Please don't tell the cops. We have to take it out anyway." Black market implants are highly illegal, and anyone caught with one would surely be taken away to rot in prison, or a work camp. They are also highly unstable, and the procedures to put them in are often conducted in less than sanitary conditions, leading to a lot of rejections and infections. It's a high-risk, high-reward prospect that's only undertaken by the desperate. But Samar is right. The evidence of the crime would soon be erased, and with it, Raoul's

only hopes of ever having a normal life in today's world. He'll be a Cyke, and that's more than punishment enough for any crime.

Treating the infection is the least she can do. She knows she can't bring the man here where the surgery could be done in their clinic. The police would be on to him in a moment. Resigned, Vanessa takes Samar over to the supply cabinet and produces two bottles of pills.

"Make sure he takes the full amount, don't let him share them with anyone else. You'll have to get the implant out as soon as possible....Do you have someone who can do it?"

"Bertie's done it before, he just needs the medicine for afterward," Samar replies, gratefully tucking the invaluable bottles away in his bag. "Thanks Vanessa. I hope Mr. B does join your secret society, and I hope I can one day too."

Vanessa gives him a hug and a warm smile. "Seems to me you're well on your way to making the world a better place as it is. Stay safe kiddo."

A moment later, Mr. B returns with a heavy, compact box. "It was a good sneak-up today Samar, so I put a little extra in there for you. Take care." Samar looks inside the box and his eyes bulge. There are enough ration packets in there to feed his whole household for a week. He gives Mr. B a quick, tight hug and then dashes away so they won't see the tears that are welling up.

Getting home, however, proves to be more difficult than he anticipates. A few short blocks away from the Levi Foundation, a grate he's climbed more times than he can count suddenly comes loose in his grip and he finds himself rapidly plummeting to the alleyway below. He crashes against a loose piece of scaffolding that partially and painfully breaks his fall, before finally grasping an unfamiliar pipe and jerking to an awkward halt. But the pipe is coated in condensation, and the jolt of his stopped momentum causes his grip to slip away. He falls the remaining few feet to the ground where he tucks into a tight ball while the scaffolding he hit comes crashing down around him with a deafening clang. By the time he unclenches and looks around he has attracted some very unwanted attention.

Two Cykes materialize from the shadows, their single eyes glinting in a hungry manner. One of them, holding a crowbar, starts to advance on Samar. "Well well well, what have we got here?" he says. The second one squats down a few feet away and flashes a practically toothless smile.

"Looks like a little boy has wandered off and gotten lost, found himself in the wolf's den."

"Don't worry little boy," the one with the crowbar says to Samar. "We know how frightening it can be out in the dark, we'll make sure you get on your way unharmed, and all we ask in return is that you leave us that bag you got there. A generous offer, if you ask me." Samar backs away slowly, his eyes going wide. He can't part with everything he's got, not when his family is counting on him.

"A little too generous," continues the toothless one, "I think I might have to charge interest on this particular service," he finishes, producing a rusted blade from under his coat as his face turns menacing. Samar continues to back away, trying not to let his fear overtake him. If he runs, they'll catch him in moments, so he scans the alley around him to see if there's a way to climb out. He's pretty sure he can climb faster than they can, but there aren't any handholds he can see. Before he knows it, his back is pressed up against a wall, and the two Cykes are closing in.

"You can yell for help if you want," Toothless continues, while Crowbar swings his weapon back and forth. "Nobody will come, of course, but I quite like it when the little lambs' bleat."

Crowbar lunges forward and snatches hold of the bag Samar is clutching tightly. Despite the much larger man's strength, Samar finds it in himself to hold on. They tug back and forth for a moment before the Cyke puts the weight of his body into his pull, sending Samar sprawling to the ground. The seams of the backpack begin to tear, but Samar staunchly refuses to release it. "Let go you little shit!" the man growls and stomps down on Samar's hand. Pain blinds him, and he screams out. When his vision clears, he can see that the fingers on his left hand are bent at a dizzyingly odd angle. "Let that be a lesson to you, you're trespassing on *our* turf!" he hears the Cyke growl as he raises the crowbar to strike what would certainly be a devastating blow. Before he can bring it down, a voice rings out in the darkness, causing all three of them to pause and look toward its origin.

"That's quite enough of that, I think," are the words that echo down the alley, and a familiar figure steps forward.

"Mr B!" cries Samar, a flood of relief washing through him. He doesn't know how he found him, but he's never been happier to see anyone in his whole life. His relief is short-lived, however, as the two Cykes glance at each other, chuckle, and then start toward his friend. He watches in fear as they stalk menacingly forward, Samar sees Mr B lean in and say something in a low, inaudible voice. The two Cykes straighten up and begin to back away. As they back up, Mr. B takes another step forward and the two suddenly break in their composure and scramble away into the darkness, leaving Samar to slump to the ground in relief. Mr. B helps him to his feet and dusts him off, looking over his broken hand.

"I thought Vanessa told you to stay safe, young man. Not much for following instructions, are you?" he says with a smile. Just being around Mr. B has always made Samar feel safe, but after watching him scare away the Cykes, he stares at him in wonderment.

"What did you say to them to make them run like that?" he asks.

"Oh, I just politely asked them to leave you alone, and then noted the police drone watching them." says Mr. B dismissively.

Samar looks around. "I don't see one..." he says, uncertain if he believes the story.

"Well, I guess we're all safe then, aren't we," Mr. B replies, and his tone is so comforting that all Samar can do is agree.

Back home, Old Bertie sets the broken fingers as best he can while Samar bites down on a wadded up rag. He tries not to cry. He wants to seem strong for his poor mother. But the kind old man who has lived with them for the past few years kneels down and speaks gently to him. "Samar, it's okay to cry. It doesn't make you any less strong. In fact, to be willing to show vulnerability is a great strength of its own kind. Alright?"

"Do you cry, Bertie?" Samar asks. Bertie sighs heavily and nods.

"In my time, I have cried oceans of tears. If you ever want someone to cry with, you just come and find me and we'll let it all out together," he says sincerely. Samar files the notion away for later consideration, and dutifully delivers the medicine he fetched. Bertie scratches his scraggly salt-and-pepper beard and sets a pair of glasses on his nose to read the bottles. There's only one lens in the frame, and the open side bends awkwardly around the strip of fabric Bertie wears over his missing eye. Humming his approval once he reads the bottle, he gives Samar a grateful squeeze on the shoulder.

Bertie is how Samar knows that not all Cykes are bad. He'd taught him that even the mythical cyclops for who they are named was a product of its circumstances. Whenever Samar thinks about how awful it must be to have one of your eyes removed just because your body rejects an implant (legal or not), he guesses that he understands why so many of them are angry. Without implants they'll never have a chance to leave the Heights like Samar hopes to one day. It makes them desperate, and desperate people are dangerous.

"You did well, my boy, these are just the ticket," Bertie mumbles, and begins to busy himself with the assorted equipment around him. "You don't need to be around for this part. Your mother is about to leave for work, so you should go find a quiet place to play." Samar nods, and peeks through the door into the adjacent room, where poor Raoul lies moaning with the right side of his face puffing up all red and unnatural. Then he stashes the hard-won food stores in the small kitchenette and dashes off to find Amie.

The apartment he lives in is crowded. He and his mother share a room with another family of four, bunks stacked up on the walls. Raoul, his wife, and their three children have the largest room, and Bertie has a makeshift bed in the common area, which is often hosting one family friend or another as well. With so many bodies crammed into one living space, Samar rarely spends time in the actual apartment. He's much more likely to be roaming the top floor of the building. The roof is gone in most places up there, having caved in years ago from water damage and rot, and so it's

generally free of other people. Up here, he and Bertie play games and read books, which Samar hides in an old cupboard that is surprisingly water-tight. Samar loves the old man fiercely, and suspects that Bertie is fairly fond of him as well, but his favourite times are when he can come up alone and seek out some of the older kids. Amie Harding in particular.

Amie is nearly sixteen, but she doesn't treat Samar like a little kid. They've struck up a real friendship, and despite being aware that young Samar harbours a bit of a crush on her, Amie never teases him about it. He can't say the same about her new boyfriend, Grant. Samar can't stand the guy and has no idea what Amie sees in him. Except that he's age appropriate, tall, handsome, and a little too confident, in Samar's opinion. Tonight, Samar is happy to find Amie alone, and more than a little excited to see that she's reading one of the books he's scavenged for her over the last few weeks - a math textbook. Her face lights up when she sees him approaching.

"Samar! How's my main man doing?" she sings out. Samar rolls his eyes.

"Isn't Grant your 'main man' now?"

"Grant may be my boyfriend, but you'll always be my main man. Now get your annoyingly big brain over here and help me with these math problems," she replies, waving him over to the musty couch cushions beside her. When she sees his bandaged hand, she fusses over him for a good few minutes, and Samar almost thinks that the injury was worth it to get such attention. Almost. Before long, he convinces her that he'll be fine, and they turn to the textbook. Math had always made sense to Samar, and Amie never seemed to mind getting help from someone so much younger than her. There's no official schooling in the Heights, so these educational hangouts are often the best they get. They spend the next 30 minutes poring over the new chapter Amie has started, the moonlight their only illumination this late.

This is Samar's happy place, and after an eventful evening, he needs it more than ever. But moments like this never last, and before too long Amie closes the book and stretches to her feet. "Alright my friend, my brain has turned to mush, and it's time for me to head out. I'm meeting up with Grant in a little bit. It's an exciting night. If all goes according to plan, I might not be stuck in this hellhole forever."

"Wait, you're leaving?" Samar says, a note of panic obvious in his voice.

"Don't worry little man, I'm not going anywhere right away. But I'm not staying here forever. You know I'd come back for you anyway, right?" Her reply soothes him, and he smiles bashfully, but now his curious nature has been piqued.

"So what's this big opportunity?" he asks. She looks around somewhat nervously.

"I'm not really supposed to say anything, it's kind of a secret." At this, Samar audibly groans.

"Uggggh, secrets, secrets! All anyone has these days are secrets! Come on, you can trust me. Who am I gonna tell anyway? You're basically my only friend other than Bertie."

She laughs heartily at this and gives him a friendly hug. "Okay, I'll tell you a little bit. But this is just between you and me. Grant's getting us involved with a group of people. It's kind of like a...secret society. I honestly don't know a whole lot yet, but their goal is to change the world." Samar's eyes light up when she says this, and he remembers his earlier conversation with Vanessa.

"Say no more. I don't want you to get in any trouble," he says and gives her a big wink. He thrills with the thought that Amie is getting involved with The Free World. If he plays his cards right, one day they might be working together to fix everything!

"Oh! Before you go, I got you this!" He springs up and rummages in his backpack, emerging with one of the books he found earlier - it's a medical encyclopedia called 'Anatomica'. Amie's gapes at the find. She's always said that one day she wants to be a nurse or a doctor, and a book like this is more than she could have hoped for here in the Heights.

"Oh my god! Samar, where did you get this!? Scratch that, I probably don't want to know, I'll only worry. This is incredible, thank you so much!" The tight hug that she gives him fills him with a warm glow that stays long after she's gone.

Back down in the apartment, Samar finds Bertie sitting up in his bed in the common room. Jumping up beside him, he asks, "How did the surgery go?"

"About as well as you can hope, I suppose," Bertie sighs. "The antibiotics you acquired will likely save Raoul's life. You did a good thing today Samar, even if it came at a price. Care to tell me what happened?"

"Eh. Some Cykes tried to steal it all off me on the way home, but they got scared off by a volunteer from the shelter," explains Samar. "I can't really blame them. They didn't look like they had much. I wish they hadn't been so scary though."

Bertie watches Samar for a long while after he says this. Then he shifts his weight around to bring out the small travel chess set that they frequently use. As he sets up the pieces he speaks softly. "That's a very grown-up way of thinking about it Samar. If more people had your compassion, I think the world would be a kinder place. But I hope you won't be taking any more unnecessary risks."

"Well, it's your fault, I learned it from you, old man."

"Let's play, and while we do, tell me everything," replies Bertie with a laugh, and the two set about playing a speedy game of chess while Samar relays the events of the night. When he is finished telling the story, Bertie strokes his beard thoughtfully and asks, "What would you have done if Mr. B hadn't shown up?"

Samar thinks for a moment and then says honestly, "I have no idea." Bertie gets a serious glint in his eye and picks up the pace of his moves on the chess board while speaking in a somber tone.

"Samar, in life, you must learn to be decisive, and to take action swiftly." He demonstrates by sliding his bishop confidently across the board to take one of Samar's knights. "Sometimes you are right, and sometimes you are wrong, but you must react to circumstances as they unfold." Before Samar sees what's happening, several more of his pieces are swiftly taken and dread begins to settle in. "Never forget, the game isn't over until checkmate is called, so do your best while you have the chance." Samar suddenly sees an opening caused by Bertie's bold technique and shifts his strategy to take advantage of it. "Sharpen your instincts, hone your mind, and trust your gut. You may not end up where you wanted to, but you'll be a damn sight better off than if you freeze up." Bertie slides his remaining knight into a position that foils Samar's plan, and the game ends in a stalemate. "Do you understand, my boy?"

"I think so. Thanks, Bertie. I'll get you next time," he says with a smirk, and then rushes off to bed. Bertie smiles after him, internally beaming with pride that rubs up against an old emotional wound.

"I don't doubt you will, young man. I don't doubt you will."

INTERLUDE

Lack and Loneliness, Dark Side of the Moon

Once again returning to the small observational ship high above Earth, HZ perceives a small shift in the attitude of his fellow Zincods. He has been spending more and more time on the planet as an observer, relaying the experience back to those who wish to stay aboard. Before he even enters the main flight deck where they are all to meet, he senses their concern that his perspective is becoming clouded by his time among the humans. Shoring up his empathic reserves and preparing to continue to argue his case, he joins his kinsmen in their gathering.

As the group of them enter into a shared empathic space, HZ opens his consciousness and allows them to view all that he has observed up close on the surface of this small blue and green oasis. At first, the sheer strength of the images is overwhelming. Destruction, war, fighting, division, and so much hurt. They view international conflicts, smaller skirmishes within nations, the violent deaths of so many, and the unjust persecution of so many more.

A few of the Zincods begin to pull back, finding these images more than sufficient to make a conclusion, these are a dangerous people that cannot be allowed to flourish. But HZ encourages them to probe deeper, beyond the surface of events to find the heart of them. First, he exposes them to the fear and loneliness seeded deep inside the perpetrators of all this violence. The desperate desire to protect their own, and how limited their perception of who 'their own' is due to their formidable sense that different is dangerous. The distress caused by the perception of lack. A lack of resources, a lack of friends, a lack of love, a lack of hope. They see fighters on each side of conflicts fully believing that they are acting in the best interest of their loved ones, completely unaware of the damage they are doing to the collective fractal resonance of the planet's consciousness because their fear has cut them off from it. They are so alone and afraid, and HZ allows the idea to blossom within their group mind that adjusting human perception - removing the lack and loneliness - is all that is needed to ensure that humanity not only grows, but thrives. This is something that the Zincods and the Federation can supply.

To emphasize his point that at their core humans are worthy, HZ takes them even deeper into the hearts and minds of individuals that they have identified as major players in quantum potential - those who are likely to play a large role in the shaping of humanity. Zincods cannot predict the future, but they are sensitive to the shape of the quantum field and how individuals are positioned to interact with it. There is no certainty

in this flow of potential events, as sentient beings have free will, but it is an indicator of presumably influential figures. It's a quality that some humans refer to as destiny, although the word is amusingly feeble at encompassing the true meaning of quantum potentiality.

In April Shanaghan, they feel the strength of the loving bond a wife feels for her lost husband, and the pain it causes when she perceives that the bond has been broken by death. How much pain could be relieved if they were aware that this bond can never be broken, no matter the distance, no matter the change in circumstance? Hz displays the hypothetical adjustment of her consciousness, and her frequency instantly reverts to loving harmony, dispelling the pain and loss. They witness a scene of chaos as Terry Myson orders soldiers to storm a building while others attempt to protect it. He allows them to feel the love driving each of the soldiers forward into fear and violence, and Terry Myson's pure desire to end suffering. He imagines their points of view expanding to see each others' fear, and they become unwilling to inflict more of it on each other, laying their arms down. Through Emily Finn he shows them the anguished desire of human healers to save their patients from dying of disease and damage, and how close so many of them are to understanding how to fundamentally shift the quantum field to eliminate the suffering. It's a gap that requires only the smallest of bridges and yet could entirely shift the course of the species. He lets them fully feel how strongly he believes that intentionally denying them this bridge is a cruelty that their own harmonic frequency cannot allow.

A note of dissenting opinion presents itself into the shared heartspace. An image is projected of Samar Behi, a defenseless young boy, accosted in an alleyway by men that hopelessly outclass him in strength even without their weapons, which they now brandish against him. This is what this world has to offer, speaks the new opinion. A world that intentionally and knowingly hurts its own people enough to place these three figures in this situation. A boy with nowhere to turn, afraid for his life, and those who wish him harm. They are monsters, and the boy cannot hope to become anything but a monster one day as well. This world breeds hate, and that hate cannot be allowed to spread across the galaxy.

HZ quickly freezes the image in all of their minds. He is careful to acknowledge the dissenting opinion, and the value of its concern. Then he offers another view. He opens the heart of the young boy for all to see, and through the mist of fear they can all see it. His compassion is shining through. He sees these men not for what they are, but for what they have been made, and he accesses the quantum chord of forgiveness. The song of harmony sings deep within this child despite his circumstances. Then HZ offers that this is not an anomaly. This is the seed that grows at the core of humanity. That

seed is being planted as they confer, in soil where it will surely grow. He shows them Noah Levi with a group of humans dedicated to this growth establishing a new, free world. A world of equality and compassion - the very world that HZ has been trying to show them this one can become. On the small island where they build, the spark of hope burns brightly, and HZ expands the view to show similar sparks emerging all around the globe. Faint, but present -

A sudden wave of nauseating potentiality sweeps through the group of watchers. Something is happening on the planet that is massively influencing its frequency. The group quickly extends their combined consciousness to find the source. It's a power plant located in the region of Earth known as California. An extreme activist group that labels themselves GreenPlanetX - a group with massive potential to affect the world - has stormed the compound. The Zincods feel their intentions: they have come to execute the leaders of this corporation, who they consider corrupt, and seize control of this experimental reactor which is capable of producing enormous amounts of energy. They are streaming the activity on Network feeds everywhere, hacking in using an extraordinary coordination of efforts spread out across the world. They want everyone to know that the owners of this reactor have refused their demands to supply power to the people in a clean, affordable manner. In doing so, they posit that these owners have shown themselves unworthy of positions of power, and so shall be put to death publicly. But something has gone wrong.

Sirens have begun to blare, and the activists, who sport white masks with a green X emblazoned on them have begun to panic. They try to run, but there is nowhere to go. Something has detonated within the reactor, and while the world watches an explosion the size of which has never been seen consumes an unbelievable portion of lower California. Millions of people are instantly killed, and the shockwave of suffering is so immense that the Zincods shatter their empathic bond to shield themselves from the worst of it. Even so, many of them are physically thrown to the floor of the ship by the severity of what they are witnessing.

As they recover, several of the Zincods are shocked to see that HZ, now visibly shaking under the effort, has refused to break his empathic bond with the planet. He allows the full effect to flow through him, feeling the pain of the world he is growing to love. His consciousness screams out as he desperately focuses his attention on his small spark of hope, now dwarfed by the blazing glow of devastation. He doesn't know if this tiny spark will be enough, but he clings on to it, believing against all odds that it will be. It has to be...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Supetar, Croatia (The Free World)

Noah Levi

Noah Levi opens his eyes and rises from the meditation pod where he has been sitting cross-legged, recharging himself for the busy day ahead. Looking out across the little community they have built over the past few years he is filled once more with an incredible sense of purpose.

Surely this is the way life is meant to be lived. Surely the rest of the world will come to see it soon enough. Stretching out his limbs, his mind begins to pore over what he intends to achieve today, a little thrill of excitement pulsing through him as he contemplates the surprise he has arriving later.

Heading into the centre of what has been built so far, he revels in the early morning sunlight glinting off of the beautifully designed modular buildings that comprise their little town. The hustle and bustle of everyday life has begun, but it's nothing like the stressful grind all of them once knew. There's a serenity to the activity, with everyone moving at a pace that suits them. And yet the smoothness of that pace, combined with the excitement of accomplishment and everyone's pleasant attitudes, creates an environment where things are happening at what feels like blinding speed. He is reminded of what an instructor said in a Tai Chi martial arts lesson the other day, "Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast." Noah has certainly found that to be true across the board here in Supetar.

Before long he finds Adriana, a vision of beauty in a red sundress, ruby red lips, in the middle of a swirl of activity. She's approving plans as a newly delivered swath of modulars nears completion.

"Things look like they're going well here! Any issues connecting the new arrivals to our central plumbing network?" Noah asks.

"Well good morning to you too, Lover!" Adriana teases before gesturing to share with Noah the digital checklist she is working from on her internal display. "No problems so far, although Simon mentioned he wanted to talk to you. I think everything is well in hand here. I almost can't believe how easy these things are to assemble! What do we have our build time down to?"

"If we have some of the more experienced people on hand, then it only takes about four or five hours to raise one of the homes right from scratch. But even without them, the new instruction program that Simon wrote means that a team of six completely new people can probably complete a project in under eight hours at a leisurely pace. It's incredible!" she answers. Noah takes a deep appreciative breath and then offers his hand to his wife.

"Well, Vanessa won't be arriving for a little while...so sure, let's go congratulate Simon," he agrees.

The two of them stroll hand in hand further down the wide laneway, which is lined with young fruit trees. A couple minutes later they find themselves approaching a modular home conveniently located next to a large workshop. The modest but comfortable residence has a tall hedge growing up around it to shield Simon from the sun's glare as he tinkers with his creations on his terrace. He never could separate work from home, so it only made sense to place them next to each other to reduce his need to travel if he required something from the workshop. Without looking up from the circuit board he is in the middle of constructing, Simon holds up one finger to indicate he'll be with them in just a moment. It's a method of communication that Noah and Adriana have been familiar with for years. They know he's not being rude, in fact, the mere act of acknowledging their presence while absorbed in his work is something of a compliment. After a few quick adjustments, he sets his tools down and jumps up to greet his friends.

"Good morning, good morning, good morning!" he practically shouts as he dances around various parts and pieces of machinery that he has lying around to come over to them. "Thanks for coming you two. I'm just finishing up some tweaks to the new fleet of farming drones." Now that Noah knows what he is looking at with the seemingly random pile of parts, he begins to see the drone's basic construction through the chaos. Adriana claps her hands happily.

"That's amazing Simon! When do you think you can get me updated info so I can calculate new projections?" she asks. Simon waves his hand dismissively in the air and picks his way past them and over toward the workshop door through a handsomely maintained gap in his hedge.

"Oh don't worry about that. I'll be finished with the drones soon, the projections will update themselves," he says as he disappears through the gap, waving at them to follow. Adriana gives Noah a curious look and then the two of them start after Simon.

"What do you mean they'll update themselves, Simon?" she asks as they follow him inside, where a bank of computers stacked somewhat haphazardly are running a complex program. Simon plops down into a chair and spins around with an eager grin on his face.

"That's what I wanted to show you. She's done!" he exclaims, throwing his arms wide. Noah waits for him to explain further before realizing that he doesn't plan to.

"I'm gonna need you to elaborate a bit buddy," he says, tentatively. Simon's eyes gleam in the light of the monitors and he leans in.

"Bea! My central AI program! She's finally ready to launch!" he exclaims. Noah is caught slightly off guard.

"Wait, I thought she wasn't going to be ready for another couple months.....you mean she's ready for a *full* launch?"

"All the bells and whistles baby. All the drones - farmers, fabricators, monitors and more - all the housing assistants, all the communications, power supply, central

computation...*everything*. Ready and operational under one program as soon as I push this button," Simon explains, wagging his finger over his keyboard.

"Oh my god...Simon, I don't know what to say!" Noah and Adriana are stunned, but overjoyed. Bea is Simon's true baby. An all-in-one artificial intelligence program capable of running everything in Supetar independently. And not just Supetar. Once they can distribute the system, Bea can run every Free World hub. Simon's ultimate dream is to find a way back into the satellite grid, where Bea will be able to assimilate all the hubs together to create a Network to reconnect the world.

"You're going to put me out of a job!" Adriana remarks.

"That's kind of the point, isn't it?" Simon responds. All Adriana and Noah can do is look at each other and laugh. "The configuration protocol will limit her to just us while we test her out, but as soon as we're fully beta'd we can link everyone else up too. So, what do you say Noah, are we a go?" Noah's eyes are wide as he nods excitedly. Simon presses the enter key and the quiet whine of the computer drives spools up. After a few moments the three of them each receive an alert on their implants and a message appears on a nearby surface.

**ACCESS REQUESTED BY PROGRAM: BEA
AUTHORISE? YES NO**

All three of them press the holographic 'yes' and hold it while the implant verifies their biometric data. Almost as soon as the authorization is complete, they hear a pleasant voice inside their heads.

"Hello. I am Bea, your virtual Assistant. Please note the new access icon in your system menu. How may I be of service today?"

The three of them give a cheer and Simon shows them how to set up their preferences, including voice activated access. They spend the next hour or so playing with the various capabilities that Bea offers them until suddenly Noah gets an alert.

"Noah Levi I have received a notification that Vanessa Hemp is inbound down at the Docks. She is requesting your presence as she arrives with a guest. Shall I confirm?"

"Yes! Thank you Bea, please confirm, I'll head right down," Noah says and then pats Simon on the back. "I thought I was going to get to reveal the big surprise today. I should have known you'd beat me to the punch!"

"Wait, another surprise?" chimes Adriana. "What is it?"

Noah grins. "Follow me down to the docks, I'll show you."

Noah and Adriana park their electric scooters near the small dock that's served as their main port of entry since they arrived four years ago. With an almost girlish glee,

Adriana springs down the steps and looks out across the water in the direction of the airport over in Croatian territory. After a few moments of scanning, her shoulders slump slightly when she can't find any sign of Vanessa's incoming boat, or Noah's big surprise. Noah laughs at her confused frown as he catches up.

"You promised me a surprise - wait, you weren't just trying to get me alone, were you? You know you don't have to trick me for that..." she says with a coy glint in her eye. Noah can't help but melt into her for a moment before redirecting his gaze out on the water.

"Not this time, my love. Actually, I thought it would be here by now, along with Vanessa. We must have made pretty good time getting down here. Don't worry, you'll see it in a moment," consoles Noah. Adriana searches the water again, but she can't see anything inbound. Then, Noah gasps slightly, unable to contain his excitement.

"I don't see anything, Noah," she says, confused.

"That's because you're looking in the wrong direction," he says, turning her so that she is looking not across at Croatia, but to her left. Her jaw drops as she finally sees it rounding the corner of their island. She can hardly believe her eyes, but there it is, huge and glorious. It's an aircraft carrier. Sending a shocked look back toward Noah, who smiles and nods, she returns her gaze to the massive ship sailing further into view. Not just *any* aircraft carrier. *Their* aircraft carrier. "What do you think?" he whispers into her ear as he hugs her from behind.

"What do I think? I think I married a madman!" she says, laughing incredulously. "Noah, how did you do this? I know the accounts. With the other five hubs under construction, and even more coming, there's no way the account from the Kellers can handle a purchase like this!"

"You're right, of course. That's why I didn't go through the Keller account. This one's purely ours." He hands her a pair of binoculars. "Look closer." She brings the lenses up to her eyes and starts to locate the ship. "It's the first of many, I hope, but for now, it's the flagship of The Free World Navy." Focusing on the ship, she finally sees it, emblazoned across the bow in enormous white letters: FWN ADRIANA.

"You named it after me?" she says, the words barely escaping her lips.

"Of course. I never would have made it here without you. It was a no-brainer."

"Noah, I don't understand. I mean, it's incredible, but you invested pretty much everything you had into The Levi Foundation and then The Free World. How on earth did you afford an *aircraft carrier*?" At this, Noah gives a heavy sigh and a bit of a shrug.

"I guess I'd better come clean....I, uh...I kind of went to my parents."

"You WHAT!? Your parents always hated the idea of The Free World, how did you convince them to pay for this? And why? You always said you'd never take another dime from your parents!" she retorts, in utter shock at the revelation.

"I know! I know. But we needed this. We underestimated how difficult it would be to get around when we went international. Some airports, like Split," he says, indicating

across to the Croatian airport they have been utilizing, "have been accommodating, but even then it means we're overly reliant on the Croatian government, which is kind of beside the point of all this. And some places, even America, it's almost impossible to book flights in and out of. The world is unstable, and if we want to be able to stay connected to the other hubs - which is absolutely vital - and get in and out of places without too much detection to retrieve our recruits, this is our best solution.

"As for my parents, well, California last year really shook them up. I think they finally realized that their money isn't going to protect them, no matter how much they have. I was already easing them into it with the idea of our export business, so they were half on board (pardon the pun) already when the power plant explosion happened. It still took a bit of doing, but eventually they agreed to the purchase. They're actually beginning a relocation to our hub in Cuba."

"CUBA!?" Adriana yells, unsure whether he is joking.

"I know! *Believe* me, I know. Who would have guessed that my father would ever set foot in that 'communist hellhole'. Small miracles, I suppose," Noah says in confirmation.

"I don't think you'll ever stop surprising me, my impossible man," says Adriana, folding herself around his body. She doesn't let go until the boat ferrying Vanessa and her guest from the ADRIANA pulls up at the dock.

Vanessa heads directly over to them while a couple of volunteers begin to unload the skiff. "Noah, Adriana, hello! How goes the homestead?" she asks as she approaches.

"All the better for having you back, Vanessa," Noah calls out, "Who'd you bring along? Have you found us a new recruit?"

"Not quite," she replies, turning back toward the dock, where a familiar shock of scarlet locks grabs everyone's attention.

"Layla!" Adriana beams and skips down to greet their benefactor.

Vanessa gives Noah a pointed look. "It would seem that Dario Keller is keeping a close eye on our development."

"I would expect no less, Vanessa. We owe him and Layla pretty much everything. The least we can do is show her what we've been up to."

After a thorough tour, the group seats themselves in a beautiful garden that dominates a section of the downtown area. Although he had felt confident in the progress they had been making, the wide-eyed wonder that Layla has displayed since arriving has boosted Noah's confidence a hundred-fold.

"The team you've assembled here is quite remarkable. How did you find everyone?" she asks. Noah, never shying away from an opportunity to boast about his friends, eagerly responds.

"The vast majority of that effort comes down to Vanessa. I've placed her in charge of finding and assessing new recruits for the initial Free World hubs. Her instincts about people are impeccable, I trust her choices implicitly, and I have yet to be disappointed."

"As complimentary as Noah is," Vanessa interjects, "he is vastly oversimplifying the process. Simon helped us develop an algorithm to search databases, sorting for the most forward thinkers in every field. Plus a whole host of other indicators that signal a potential match for our evolving ecosystem. I'd be lost without it."

"Now Vanessa is the one oversimplifying things," Adriana chimes in. "There's no denying that Simon's algorithm makes the search much easier, but if you ask him, even he has been consistently blown away with Vanessa's ability to bring together scientists, technicians, teachers, thinkers, and more, that truly fit the mold of what we are trying to create. We've made so many advancements due to their addition, it's truly a testament to her ability to vet recruits."

Noah pipes up next, "I'd be blown away too, if I didn't know Vanessa so well. We've blossomed here to a population of about seventy-five individuals so far, including a wonderful group of children. Everyone agrees that the success rate of her vetted choices is one hundred percent."

"So far?" Layla asks. "How many people are you looking for?"

Adriana pulls up some holographic charts and shares them with the group. "We're constantly monitoring to adjust our models, of course, and each hub will have their own adaptive thresholds, but we believe that smaller communities thrive much better than the larger cities of the old, for-profit world. In the Profits, all the people crammed into large urban settings effectively shattered any semblance of balance with the natural world, requiring damaging monoculture farming, and huge density of resources. Currently, we believe that our polyculture agricultural practices, and the organization of our society will be able to sustain productive, happy communities of up to three thousand."

"Fascinating!" Layla exclaims, poring over the information display. "Can you show me how the algorithm works?" Noah lets out a hearty laugh.

"Well, if you're really interested, you can ask Simon about it. But I would only recommend that if you're ready to sacrifice a few hours to his lecture-style explanation. In the meantime, I'm sure Vanessa wouldn't mind showing you some prospect profiles."

Vanessa goes through a brief report on some interesting potential recruits she is investigating. She demonstrates how her position at the Levi Foundation gives her access to large pools of community-minded people all over the world, and indicates the markers that cause certain profiles to rise to the top of the list.

"I also have contacts on the ground at all of the Foundation's locations. They keep an eye on my list of people for me, and report their impressions when I come to visit. I'm heading to Washington D.C. soon, for example, where I have Neil here," she says, indicating a photo of a handsome young blonde man, "who is frustratingly reluctant to

jump into The Free World with both feet. However as a scout he's brought a number of good prospects to my attention." She slides the display up and thumbs through a thick stack of profiles. "The algorithm scans for skills, disposition, footage, history - and a hundred other things, and sorts prospects into an order that I can relay to Neil, who lets me know his thoughts as he observes the selected people. Sometimes I agree, and sometimes I don't, I let my instincts from my personal interactions guide my final decisions. Sometimes there are profiles that are a good fit, but the timing isn't right yet," she explains, pointing to a file showing a young family with the last name Finn.

"If I may be so bold," interrupts Layla, "do I have a profile in the algorithm?"

Noah smiles warmly. "The Free World wouldn't exist without you, Layla. You're not in the sorting system." He returns the display to a menu and scrolls away from "Prospects", selecting a tab titled "Residents" instead. Quickly navigating through the alphabetical order, he brings the hologram to rest on a section that he gestures Layla to examine more closely. Her name is clearly emblazoned with a tag in green that reads 'Accepted - 96% match'. "There's no pressure, of course, but you're entirely welcome here."

Layla blushes slightly and a strange expression flashes across her face. "Mr. Levi, that's very kind of you, but I'd rather my father's money didn't buy me access to this, like it has everything else. I want to earn it for myself."

Slightly taken aback, Noah pauses while he ponders this. After considering her request, he shrugs and smiles. "Fair enough! Bea, can you please run Layla's profile through the selection algorithm, removing references to her familial and financial ties?" He changes his privacy setting so that Bea's response is shared with the group. Vanessa and Layla jump slightly in surprise when the disembodied voice responds.

"Of course, Noah. Adjusted Algorithmic processing complete. Displaying results."

Layla's profile reappears with several sections redacted. Near the top, underneath the title "Prospect Match %", her calculated compatibility score blinks slowly: 100%

"Well Ms. Keller," Noah says with a smile, "it seems to me that all your father's money was doing, was holding you back. Why don't you stick around for a little while, figure out where *you* want to be?" Layla's face seems stricken with complete shock, but as the realization of the results fully reaches her, the corners of her mouth twitch, and then slide up into a fierce grin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

(2048)

Washington D.C

Danny Finn

Danny steadies his breath as another volley of strikes flies toward him, slightly quicker than he expected. He backs up a few paces and then shifts slightly to one side as a kick blurs past, nearly catching him in the sternum. This gives him the opening he's been looking for as the next punch whips through the air where he had been a moment ago. He catches the wrist, twisting it around and sending his opponent crashing to the ground.

"Good, Robbie!" he says, smiling at his son, who lies crumpled in the grass, catching his breath.

"Are you ever gonna let me hit you?" sighs Robbie, clambering back to his feet.

"What would be the point of *letting* you hit me? Do you think whoever you are fighting is going to *let* you hit them?" asks Danny. Robbie responds by rolling his eyes and dropping back into a fighting stance, ready for another go. "Hold up, Robbie. Your technique is good, you've learned it well, but try to focus on your intention. You weren't really trying to hit me there, were you? You were just throwing that last punch because it's what comes next in the technique. But I'd already shifted and I wasn't there anymore. Memorizing a technique isn't what makes you a good fighter. You're fast, and you're getting stronger every day. Now you need to learn to respond to what's happening in front of you. Don't just blindly follow a technique if it doesn't make sense. Learn to strike where I am, not where I was. Eventually you'll start to feel where I *will* be. That's when you'll hit me, and you'll have earned it."

Danny has trained in a variety of martial arts throughout his life. Karate, Judo; he is a Rokudan, or sixth degree black belt, in Ninjutsu. But teaching others has pulled his understanding of martial concepts into sharp focus, and passing on all he has learned to his son has become one of the great joys in his life. Not to mention a method to relieve the anxiety he feels about Robbie's place in this world. In what seems like the blink of an eye his little boy has turned into a lanky fourteen-year-old who is starting to lean into the rebellious side that often accompanies the teenage years. Their time training together feels like solid ground in an ocean of uncertainty.

Robbie hadn't shown much interest in fighting when he was younger, but when Clint and April had come to stay with them, Clint had asked Danny to teach him one day while watching him practice in the back yard. Before too long, Robbie grew curious about the strange moves the pair rehearsed tirelessly on days off, and decided to leave video games behind as his main pastime to join them. Thinking back, Danny often misses those days. He's grateful to Clint for giving him that gift with Robbie. And for

giving Robbie more opportunities to learn all about leveraging his smaller size against a larger opponent. The trio had been extremely close for a while, to the great delight of April, who had been very concerned about role models after Clint lost his father. It's been lonelier since Clint left.

Danny squares off again with Robbie and they continue training, moving back and forth across the yard with increasing speed as Robbie taps into his youthful energy to press the advantage. Danny is just about to stop him to show how much extra energy he is expending, rather than being efficient with his movements, when out of nowhere a small, inconspicuous square of grass pops up. Emily reaches out of the hole in the ground, grabbing Danny's ankle just as he is about to put his weight down, causing him to lose balance and sprawl backwards. In a flash, Robbie is on top of him, pinning him down and then swinging his legs around to put Danny's arm in a hold, forcing him to tap out. "Gotcha!" beams Robbie.

"Hey, no fair!" chuckles Danny, "You're teaming up on me!"

"You should be more mindful of your surroundings, grasshopper!" Emily mocks playfully.

"Yeah Dad, do you think whoever you're fighting isn't going to team up on you?" Robbie teases.

Danny concedes the point with a jovial grumble. "How's it going down in the bunker?" he asks, peeking into the hole in which Emily stands. He started building it in secret shortly after he joined the rebel cause. The thought that he might be discovered and the military might come for his family was keeping him up at night anyway, so he regularly used those sleepless hours to put his construction skills to use, building a secret space under the back yard where they can hide out for a few days if necessary. The trap door is cleverly disguised with overlapping sections of sod that seamlessly blend into the rest of the yard once it's lowered. If you don't already know that it exists, there's almost no chance that you'll find it. The somewhat narrow shaft houses a built-in ladder that takes you down to the bunker proper - a small but cozy room with a reinforced ceiling and walls, meager furnishings, and well hidden ventilation shafts. Emily has been stocking the shelves over the last while with preserved foodstuffs and bottles of water, completing a project that Danny has wanted ready for quite some time.

"Nearly done, but I could use an extra hand for a minute. Robbie, you want to come help out? Your Dad needs to get cleaned up. He and Aunt April are volunteering today." She's expecting resistance, but is pleasantly surprised when Robbie nods happily.

"Sure Mom," he says, shuffling over to the entrance. Danny smiles inwardly. He may be growing up into a moody teenager, but he's still their helpful little boy on occasion. Brushing off the grass and dirt, Danny turns his attention back to the house, where he needs to go wake April. Today is a hard day for her, and last night she had a bit too much to drink before heading to bed. She's likely to be pretty hung over, so

Danny starts the coffee machine going before rinsing off in the shower and dressing in presentable clothes. Swinging back to the kitchen to gather a mug of steaming coffee, he gingerly knocks on April's door and inches it open.

To his surprise, she's already awake and waves him in with a bleak-looking grimace that might have been an attempt to smile. He sees that she's clearly watching a Network feed, and when he gestures to tap in to the same one, he feels an extra weight in his heart. It's the anniversary of the California explosion three years ago, and the news feed she is watching has dedicated their broadcast to a retrospective of the events surrounding it. Currently, a slick-haired pundit is expounding on the dangers of GreenPlanetX. Images of white masks with green X's are shown paired with words like 'terrorist', and 'coward'.

"...and you have to wonder where these guys get off, with this ever-increasing form of extremism! It was one thing when they were lobbying heavy polluters and corporations to adopt more 'environmentally-friendly' practices. If you tend toward bleeding-heart liberalism you might have even agreed with them! But now we can see where these type of people *always* end up. And I hope you're paying attention out there!! I've been saying it for years and the softies out there criticized me endlessly for it, but look where we are now! They've progressed to sudden and *violent* take-overs of companies. Executing the job-creators that keep our economy afloat! You think the brand of eco-terrorism that caused the blast in California is the end of it? Do you think they are satisfied with murdering millions of innocents? Don't bet on it! I say we hunt down this mysterious masked leader and give *him* the same treatment he's been indiscriminately dishing out!"

Danny knows that at least half of what they are saying is government sponsored propaganda (or 'bullshit', as he prefers to call it). GreenPlanetX always offer peaceful resolutions before they intervene, and only resort to violence when they are met with violent resistance themselves. While his own rebel group and GPX don't collaborate, or even see eye to eye necessarily, LaToya theorizes that the government blew up the plant themselves. Partly in a desperate bid to eliminate whoever is running GPX, but moreso to drum up a new wave of anti-rebel hostility and excuse a doubling-down on military expansion. If that was their plan, it unfortunately worked.

"You shouldn't watch that crap, April," Danny suggests gently as he hands her the warm mug and sits next to her on the bed.

"I can't forgive them Danny. First those fucking rebels took my husband, and then they took my son. I know I should forgive them, but I can't, and I hate myself for it. Because I understand why Clint was so angry. Of course he was. I just couldn't see it until it was too late. Until they went too far. And now he's gone too," she says quietly. She'd had an agreement with Clint that when he turned sixteen, and his turn for conscription came, he would choose the medic path. It would have allowed him to stay in the city and kept him out of extreme danger. But on this day three years ago, they

had a massive argument when Clint declared that he couldn't just stand by while all the extremists kept murdering innocent people like they had his father. The explosion in California had been the last straw, unleashing the flood of anger and hate that he had been harbouring for years. Danny had tried to intervene, his heart breaking because he couldn't risk everything by telling him that the very people he was signing up to fight for were the ones who took his father from him. But Clint was past listening by that point anyway, and with no compelling reason that Danny could give him to stay, he stormed out and signed up for the combat troops. They'd never seen him again.

"You can't blame yourself, April. It's not your fault. You did everything you could have," he offers.

"Doesn't that just make it worse? That I was so helpless?" she asks, searching Danny's eyes for answers he doesn't have.

CHAPTER NINE

Danny Finn

The next day at work, Danny feels as though his mind is trying to push through thick mud to get anything done. He's distracted, and easily annoyed by Neil's near-constant chatter. Answering personal questions is literally the last thing he feels like doing, especially when he has to be careful not to say anything to raise suspicion about his allegiances. He's almost certain that the rebels have other operatives placed inside Rueger Arms, but to maintain the integrity of separate rebel cells, they refuse to let him know who those operatives might be. The worse thought is that if the rebels have spies on the inside, the government almost certainly does as well. The curiosity over who might be an ally and who an enemy bears down on his mind everyday. He's grown to become mildly suspicious all the time, and yet must constantly maintain an air of innocence. Still, his status as a double-agent has proven to be pretty low risk, and the promise of protection for his family is usually enough to keep him going. Today, however, the weight of it all is almost too much to bear.

It's an almost blessed relief when Harold interrupts Neil's latest query with a shipment report that requires his sign-off. He politely excuses himself from the conversation (if you can call something that one-sided a conversation) and jogs over to Harold's station. As soon as he pulls up the display on his own implant his mind snaps into focus. The shipment that has been pulled up is one that LaToya earmarked for an 'unscheduled pickup' by the rebels. "Hm, are you sure these numbers are right Harry?" he asks nonchalantly.

"Pretty sure Danno. Why, something look off?" Harold replies.

"Nah, I'm just double-checking. Manny's been on my ass lately. Tell you what, I'm gonna head down to the floor and make sure everything's up to snuff. You sign off on it now so you can keep working. Once I've made sure the warehouse hasn't fucked us I'll approve it and get it sent out. Sound good?"

Harold's not the type to question Danny on work matters, so it's not much of a question. Danny's pretty much out the door already by the time Harold gives a big thumbs up and moves on to the next report. He hates lying to his friend like that, but it's the easiest way for him to alter the records. Harold's sign off doesn't *technically* get put on the report until he signs off as well. But with the pending digital signature already in place, Danny can make discreet changes in the inventory totals without anyone noticing. Since the warehouse employees have already loaded up the order, no one notices the change in the inventory. Rebels stealthily abscond with the deleted crates at a predetermined pit stop, and when the order arrives, it's consistent with Danny's authorized (but altered) manifest. The rebels get their weapons, and hopefully no one is the wiser. If anything goes wrong and the pickup doesn't happen, the order simply arrives with too many crates, which get returned to the factory.

The actual alteration of the report is so familiar to Danny that he could finish it before he makes it to the elevator, but he makes the trip to the warehouse floor anyway to maintain appearances. He's only just approved the order when he suddenly gets an alert calling him up to Manny's office. Knowing that there are cameras everywhere, he tries to appear unaffected by the notification, while internally his brain frantically examines everything he's done at work lately. Finding no deviation from the normal routine that might have tipped someone off, he relaxes slightly, but his nerves are still on edge. Manny doesn't call him up very often, and when he does, it's never for something good. The trip up the elevator elicits a vague feeling of déjà vu from the morning that Albert was killed. A memory that he's not too keen to revisit.

When he finally makes his way into Manny's office, the CEO is in the middle of a call with someone. With Manny it's equally likely that the call is with someone extremely important, or that he's only pretending to be on a call to look useful, but either way Danny waits patiently just inside the door, trying to look like he isn't listening, until Manny finally hangs up. Once he does, Manny walks around his enormous desk and crooks one knee up to sit on the front of it, levelling a scrutinizing look at Danny. The length of the stare-down is just starting to make him uncomfortable when Manny finally speaks.

"Dancypants. Thanks for coming. I've got a question." He leans forward to emphasize the importance of what he's about to ask. "Do I look like a fucking idiot to you?"

Insulting nicknames aside, Danny is smart enough not to give an honest answer to that, although his anxiety spikes once more. "No sir," he responds with a decisive note. Manny nods several times while squinting at him.

"Good. Good, I'm glad that to you, I don't look like a fucking idiot. But since that's the case, maybe you can explain to me why my one of my employees seems to think he can get away with shit in MY factory without getting caught," he tosses out, accusatorily. The blood drains from Danny's face as he realizes that he must have been discovered somehow. Not willing to show his hand just yet, he maintains a guiltless composure and plays dumb.

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm not sure what you're referring to..." he says, cautiously. Manny sighs loudly and shakes his head.

"Honestly Dandruff, I expect more from you. I like to run a tight ship. But one of the guys in *your* department is seriously starting to piss me off, and if you haven't caught him out yet, I need you to get your shit together, *comprende*? I mean, who does this Neil Babbett think he is anyway?"

When Danny doesn't respond right away and stands there with a confused look on his face, Manny cocks his head to one side and continues. "So you really didn't know? I gotta say, I'm a bit surprised by that, but I guess it's better that you're ignorant and not stupid. You see, Mr. Babbett has been taking little unscheduled breaks. Leaving his post

without permission and returning whenever he damn well pleases. When I look in on my employees, who I am paying, I expect them to be at their stations working! Not off on little sojourns of their own devising. Right now, our little Neil seems to have wandered off once again, and I need you to step your fucking game up and get your people in line. Otherwise it's not just his ass I'm gonna fire. Got it?" As soon as he finishes speaking, he strides back around his desk, gesturing to take another call (or at least pretending to). Danny stands there dumbstruck for a moment, and when Manny sees that he isn't leaving, he gives him a look that very clearly says 'fuck off'. So he does.

On the elevator ride back to ground level, Danny's head spins wildly. He's always had a weird feeling about Neil, and with this new information, weird has been upgraded to dangerous. He has a hard time believing that it's a mere coincidence that this overly-inquisitive individual just happened to leave work the moment that he stepped out to alter the rebel-marked order. If he wasn't worried about a government mole before, he very much is now. He considers sending an SOS to LaToya, but knows that without any evidence it's a bad idea. Instead, when he emerges from the door behind the front desk, he decides that he needs to gather a little more information. He puts on his best exasperated expression and leans on the desk beside Shelley, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"That bad, eh?" commiserates Shelley, friendly as always. Danny pretends to hold back for a second, and then leans in as if to confide in her.

"Shell, you know the young guy in my department, Neil?" he asks. By the slight flush in her cheeks he can tell that she's definitely noticed him.

"Umm, yeah, I think so. Blonde hair? Cute face?" she says, deciding that there's no point in hiding her attraction.

"Yeah, that's the one," Danny says wryly. "Turns out that Neil's been going kind of AWOL now and again, and Manny is pretty pissed about it. My department, so my responsibility."

"Oh Danny, I'm sorry! I guess I have noticed him stepping out a couple times, but I didn't think anything of it!" she replies, bringing her hand to her mouth in surprise.

"It's not your fault, Shelley. Manny's right for once in his godforsaken life, this is on me. Listen, can you do me a favour? I don't wanna get anyone in trouble, but I've gotta figure out what's going on. The next time Mr. Cute-Face sneaks on out of here in the middle of the day, you think you could give me a heads up directly, so we can take care of this quietly, without involving His Highness upstairs?" Danny crosses his fingers that he's not pushing his luck too far, but it seems like Shelley is feeling just guilty enough, because she places her hand on top of his and gives it a firm squeeze.

"Don't you worry, I'll keep an eye out for you. No one else needs to know," she says with a wink and a nod.

"Ms. Crimson," Danny replies with a thankful tone, "you're a lifesaver."

After work, Danny drives back down to The Levi Foundation in The Heights. While volunteering yesterday a large shipment of donated goods came in. April and Emily both signed up for an extra volunteer shift this evening to help get everything catalogued, and he's on pick-up duty. A major route is annoyingly closed due to another quarantine zone popping up, so traffic is pretty heavy by the time he nears the shelter. As he approaches the pick up zone, he hits full gridlock. His mind keeps turning over every interaction he's ever had with Neil, searching for any clue that would give him some indication of what's going on. Realizing that it's a futile effort he tries to distract himself by taking in the surrounding area, but this also fails to satisfy his hungry mind. Before too long he sees April and Emily exit the Foundation's building about a block and a half up the road, chatting to one of the organizers. He's just about to connect to them via implant to let them know to walk down to him when he notices something odd.

Between him and the ladies, there's a figure peeking out of a dark alley entrance. He considers that it's probably just because his nervous system is on high alert right now, but the figure appears to be watching Emily and April. A spike of adrenaline courses through his system as that thought flits through his mind. He's not convinced, but out of an abundance of caution built over the course of a very stressful day, he decides that he needs to know one way or the other. He pulls over to the side of the street, mildly aware that he would never usually leave his vehicle unattended in this area of The Heights, and shuts down the engine. Quickly scanning through the interior of his car he silently curses himself, a rebel spy and manager at an arms factory, for not having a weapon available. Trying not to take his eyes off the figure he is watching, he retrieves the tire iron from the trunk, it's weight helping to steady his slightly shaking hand. Moving closer up behind his target, he can't tell precisely what they are looking at since they are facing away from him. He can tell that it's definitely a man, dressed in a long, tattered old coat. From the cloth tied around his head on an angle it's likely that it's a Cyke, and the way he is peering out from the shadows indicates that he is definitely trying to stay hidden.

A moment later a delivery person makes their way to the shelter's entrance, causing Emily and April to shift across the pavement to make way for the large dolly full of packages. The figure's head follows them, making Danny certain. Whoever this is, they are watching his family. He decides that he needs to know why, and so gripping the tire iron tight in his fist he approaches the figure from behind. The second he gets in range he lunges forward, grabbing the man by his coat, spinning him around and pinning him to the wall of the alley, tire iron raised high to strike if necessary. As he thrusts the man against the wall he yells in his face, "Hey! What's your problem assho-" His words are cut short. Shock and confusion shatter his aggression instantly when he gazes into the man's face. The man reacts in horror, using the momentary surprise to break Danny's grip and disappear down the alleyway. Danny stares after him, hardly

believing his eyes. The face is older, grizzlier, and missing an eye, but Danny's disbelief is outweighed by what his brain is now telling him. He knows who this man is.

In a mild stupor Danny stumbles back to his car, desperately trying to make sense of what just happened. Shaken to his core, he decides that this is one coincidence too many. Between Neil's suspicious behaviour on a pick up day and now the man he has seen, the rebels need to be informed. He slips on his eyepatch and pulls out the old flip phone they gave him for communication. Taking a few deep breaths to compose himself, he punches in the emergency meet code and hits send. He's not sure how long it will be before LaToya responds with a location, but he knows he needs to get Emily and April home before he'll be able to meet anyway, so he starts the car back up, stows his patch, and rejoins the flow of traffic. By the time he's travelled the block and a half to meet them he's re-assumed a façade of friendly calm. He winds down the passenger window and calls out to the waiting women, "Hey! Sorry I'm late, this traffic is crazy!"

Emily bounces over to the car, pulling along the woman they've been chatting with. He's definitely seen her around before, but they've never spoken. "Hi Babe! I'd like you to meet Vanessa Hemp, the Chief Operational Officer of the whole Levi Foundation!" she says, sending him a look that any husband would recognize as 'this-is-a-very-important-person-so-please-be-cool-about-this'.

Any other day, Danny might have had a congenial response off the top of his head, but much to Emily's dismay the best he can conjure up after the events of today is, "Oh, wow! Hi!"

Luckily Vanessa has enough social grace for the two of them and she reaches through the open window to shake his hand, speaking with a strange but distinguished accent. "Danny Finn, it's so nice to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you already from your lovely wife, Emily, and your friend, April. I'd like to thank you for all the time you've spent volunteering here at The Levi Foundation, your record is quite impressive!"

Her gentle nature puts Danny much more at ease. "It's the least we can do, really. We're just happy to help."

"Well we are very lucky to have you. I won't keep you, but I've been chatting with the ladies here about an opportunity I'd very much like you to consider. I'll let them fill you in once you get home," she says, patting the roof of the car. She starts to withdraw when a sudden sequence of beeps rings out from Danny's pocket. Startled, he quickly pulls out the old flip phone, mentally cringing that he hasn't set it to silent. He switches the phone's sound off quickly, deciding to check LaToya's response later. Vanessa raises an eyebrow in interest. "A flip phone! I haven't seen one of those in a dog's age. I'm a bit of an aficionado of technological antiquities myself you know. But a word of advice: here in The Heights, best to keep tech like that out of sight, lest you attract....unwanted attention."

Danny can't be sure, but something in the way Vanessa looks at him just then gives him the impression that she might know more than she is letting on. He nods curtly and tucks the phone safely away.

CHAPTER TEN

Danny Finn

Whilst April takes the opportunity to relax in a hot bath - Emily turns to Danny, her expression dark. "Are you going to tell me what's really going on?" Emily asks, hardly able to meet her husband's gaze. He never had the strength to hide his involvement with the rebels from his wife, but he stops short of giving her too many details. That way he can limit the number of lies she has to tell and can shoulder that burden himself. But today has been too much for him, and as much as he hates himself for it, he needs his partner right now to help him carry it.

"Em, I've tried to keep your involvement in all of this to a minimum, but you know I wouldn't do anything that I didn't think was absolutely necessary, right?" He's met with hesitant silence, and so continues. "I don't know how to say this, but the rebels are pulling a job tonight and, well, I think they might be in danger, there's a guy at work, and there's a slight possibility that he's on to me." Fear flashes across Emily's face and she breathes in sharply. "Now don't worry too much, it's only a suspicion I have, but if I'm right then the only way to protect us is to let the rebels know what might be going on."

Emily watches his face for a long moment before she speaks. "I love you Danny, and you know that I trust your judgement. But I also know when you're hiding something from me. If we're in danger then fuck all the secrecy, we're in this together so just tell me."

Danny looks out the window, entirely unsure of how to say to her what she's asking to hear. But after all this time, he desperately needs to tell *someone*. He takes her hand and looks her dead in the eye. "Em, I need you to know that I'm sorry for keeping this from you for so long. I did it to protect you. And April, and Robbie, and Clint...."

"And yourself," she finishes for him. "Danny, look, it's fine. Whatever it is *just tell me*."

He braces himself and then lets it all tumble out. "You know how I told you that the rebels didn't kill Albert? That it was all just a big accident that the government pinned on them to avoid a scandal?" Her eyes narrow, afraid of what he might say next. "Well, that wasn't the whole truth. Albert worked for the rebels before me. That's why they recruited me after what happened to him. Albert found something important that day, and....and the government levelled a city block just to try and get it. That's what really happened to him."

Emily's eyes bored into him. "The government *murdered* Albert, and you never told April? Christ, Danny, you let Clint go off and *fight for them*?"

"April and Clint were in pain. They needed something to hate, someone to blame, and I couldn't put the burden of the truth on them like that. I've carried that for them for six years. I swear one day I will tell them the truth but I couldn't put you and Robbie in danger by telling a grieving family the horrible truth. What do you think would have

happened if I told them? Best case they wouldn't believe me and they hate me forever. Worst case they would believe me and one of them in their emotional state does something stupid, gets us all killed, and potentially takes the rebel cause down with them."

"You know April might never forgive you for this," Emily remarks.

"I know. That's a burden I've carried for six years as well. But today, everything changed."

"Why....what happened today?"

"Em, I don't know how to say this, but earlier today before I picked you up....I...I saw him. Babe, Albert Shanaghan is still alive."

Readjusting the magnetic patch over his eye, Danny creeps into the rundown, abandoned bungalow that LaToya set as the emergency meeting place. It's so quiet that his pulse sounds like a dull booming in his ears. "LaToya?" he whispers into the darkness. He doesn't hear a response, and so pushes further into the dark house. He passes a few empty rooms before coming across the kitchen. Stepping gingerly from the soft carpet of the hallway onto the hard tile of the kitchen, he pauses to listen in the excruciating silence.

Suddenly, a shadow leaps forward from the corner and yells "BOO!" sending a startled Danny crashing into the wall beside him before he realizes who it is. LaToya cackles with laughter, taking an old set of headphones from her ears and slapping Danny playfully on the chest.

"Jesus, LaToya. You trying to give me a heart attack?" Danny exclaims, trying to get his adrenaline rush to level off. LaToya lazily chews a piece of gum and gives him an exasperated expression.

"Consider it payback for making me wait so long. For a guy using an emergency SOS you sure took your goddamn time getting here."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know how quickly you'd be able to respond and this is important," Danny explains.

"Ah, forget about it. You sure you weren't followed?" she asks.

"I seem to recall being able to give *you* the slip," he teases in return.

"Ha! Fair enough. What's this all about Danny? I got places to be."

"Well, a couple of things happened today that I think you should know about. I don't suppose by any chance that my employee, Neil Babbett, works for you too?" he begins. LaToya gives him a disapproving look.

"If he did, do you think I would reveal that information to you?" she asks expectantly.

"Damnit LaToya, this is important! It turns out that he's been disappearing from work randomly. Including today, right as I was making the alteration for tonight's pickup. I'm worried he might be a government spy and that your guys will be walking into an ambush!"

"That's it? A hunch that this guy might be on to you?" she says, attitude edging into her tone.

"No, that's not all. Today when I was in the Heights picking up my wife, I saw something. I think it was Albert Shanaghan."

LaToya perks up as he says this. "You *think*?"

"I mean, it was quick, and he looks different, but I'm pretty sure, yeah."

"Pretty sure? Fuck's sake Danny do you think the emergency code is a joke? One of your employees takes an ill-timed lunch break and you see a homeless guy that looks like your dead old friend and you hit the panic button? What the hell is wrong with you, haven't you ever heard of the boy who cried wolf?" she says, really laying into him.

"Well excuse me for trying to keep everyone alive LaToya!" he roars back at her, then lowers his voice again. "Listen, if it was one or the other I wouldn't have bothered, but on a pickup day it was one too many coincidences to ignore. I saw him LaToya. It was him. I'm sure of it. Albert's alive, and out there somewhere and he needs our help. He was watching April and he recognized me, and I don't appreciate you treating me like some idiot! I know what I saw. And how can it hurt to warn your guys to be careful tonight just in case?"

LaToya stares at him for a long moment while she considers what he's saying, before finally relenting. "Fine. I'll run this up the flagpole. I still don't think you are, but if you're right on either account, then I guess it's worth it. Just, for Christ's sake Danny, promise me you won't call for help again unless you really need it. Okay? This messenger bullshit is not what it's designed for."

"Fair enough," he says, raising his hands in mock surrender. He knows that she's probably right, but he's still glad he took the opportunity to let them know. LaToya starts to put her headphones back on but Danny stops her for a moment. "Hey, look, if you do find him....just tell him....tell him to come home, okay?" She responds with a sympathetic sigh and nods as she melts back into the shadows. Turning to leave, Danny pivots back to say thank you, but LaToya's already gone.

When Danny finally makes it home he's exhausted, and hoping to collapse into bed, but as he enters the living room he finds Emily and April waiting up for him. His face falls when he notices April's eyes are red and puffy. When she looks up at him there's no doubt in his mind that Emily has told her his secret. Emily looks up at him with a look that implores him to be understanding. "Hi Danny," she says quietly.

"Hi," he responds. April stands up and looks directly at him.

"Is it true?" she asks simply. He opens his mouth but can't find the words to say, and so just nods grimly, bracing himself for what he expects to follow. But she just nods back, pressing her lips together tightly. She steps up to him and places a hand

tentatively on his chest before finally pressing in to hug him tightly. Surprised, Danny reciprocates the hug and looks toward Emily for explanation, who smiles encouragingly. April pulls back from the hug and looks up at him. "So we'll find him then, yeah?" she asks in a whisper.

"Yeah April, we'll find him. I promise," he replies, feeling slightly guilty. He knows his promise doesn't hold much weight, but he makes a firm decision that he'll do everything he can to fulfill it.

"Good, because we might just have a way out of here," April says. Danny looks quizzically at her, and then at Emily, who motions him over to the couch. Once they are all seated, Emily pulls out a small strange-looking device and places it on the coffee table in the middle of the room. It's unfamiliar and futuristic-looking, but as Emily presses a small button located on its side, Danny realizes that it's a modified version of a localized broadcaster. He's seen simpler versions used for sensitive information around Rueger, when someone doesn't want information like weapons plans broadcast on a wider Network. As the device activates Danny's implant display lights up with a new icon. Getting encouraging gestures from Emily and April, he activates the icon and within a moment the three of them are looking at a holographic projection that reads:

WELCOME TO THE FREE WORLD

April assigns control of the projection to Danny and explains, "Vanessa Hemp, from the Levi Foundation? She gave us this device and told us that as a household we've been selected for a very exclusive opportunity, if we're up for it." Interested, Danny activates the holographic slideshow. Images of an idyllic community begin to fade in and out, depicting people who look genuinely happy and healthy, going about daily life in peace and harmony surrounded by lush vegetation and futuristic technology. Text begins to scroll up, overlaid on the utopic picture:

Are you tired of fighting just to survive?

Instead of merely existing as a cog in an industrial machine, would you like to start really living life?

Are you ready to leave this world behind and take a leap of faith?

Here in The Free World, we can offer you and your family a sanctuary away from war, oppression, and poverty. We have established small, hidden communities around the world where a new type of society has begun to thrive and grow. A society based on love, compassion, empathy, and a shared interest in the wellbeing of all.

You don't have to buy your way into this community, in fact, here you will never have to buy anything ever again. You simply need a willingness to shed the old way of life, and embrace a new way where we all work in harmony to sustain each other and the world around us.

In this new paradigm, we have no room for the negative forces that have shaped the modern world to this point. We offer relief from greed, selfishness, pathological individualism and nationalism, division, and conflict. Our strict vetting protocol has identified YOU as people who would fit this new way of life. Your dedication to the betterment of yourselves and others has gotten you this far, are you willing to come a little further?

To maintain the protection of our growing community, we cannot reveal to you our location. It would place us all in too much danger from forces that would seek to end us before we can truly take root and better humanity on a larger scale.

Therefore, if you choose to join us, which we very much hope you will, this device will provide you with a series of location markers to follow, guiding you from your current location to a place where we can safely intercept and relocate you to your new life. Everything you need will be provided for you when you arrive in The Free World, but feel free to bring small items of sentimental, educational, or vocational value.

Our hearts go out to you in this time of strife and hardship. Please believe me when we say that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Remain safe and strong my friends, and dare to believe in wonderful things. Change is at hand, and if you so choose, you are now a part of it. Stay on the path, and we hope to see you soon in a better world. The Free World.

*Noah Levi and Friends,
Founders of The Free World*

ACTIVATE BEACON NOW? YES NO

Danny stares at this message for a long time, carefully reading it several times over before exhaling forcefully and sinking back into the couch. He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose while he contemplates the message. When he opens them again, Emily and April are looking at him expectantly. Emily speaks up first. "What do you think?"

"What do I think?" he begins, "I think it sounds a little too good to be true. It could be a trick, a way for the government to discover dissidents. It might not exist at all."

"I think you're being paranoid," Emily offers. "You've been working at full throttle in a dangerous position for so long that I think it's clouding your view of an incredible opportunity."

April chimes in, "Vanessa's a good woman, working for a charitable organization run by very wealthy people. Why would she try to trick us?"

Danny rubs his face in his hands, considering how tired he is and how stressed out he has been lately. "Yeah, I guess you're right. That makes sense. It certainly seems idyllic, but it's not like we can just...disappear. It sounds kinda dangerous. They said themselves that there are forces trying to end them. We don't know where it will lead us, it might not be easy to get there. And even if we do we don't know if it's some sorta...cult or something."

"Good points, to be sure. Things to think about, maybe sleep on. We don't have to make a decision right away, but if you ask me, I think it might be worth the risk," Emily suggests.

April pipes up again, "Danny, I have to ask you something. If you're working with the rebels, do you think you could find out where Clint is? They must have some kind of...I dunno...informant system or something, right? If we're going to leave, I need to find him."

"April, it doesn't really work like that..." he starts to say, but seeing the hopeful look in her eye that he hasn't seen for so long, he can't bring himself to break her spirit now. "But I'll ask around. Maybe someone knows something," he finishes. April nods, clearly overwhelmed by everything that's happened today. She offers a quiet good-night. Danny and Emily make their way to their own bedroom, not bothering with their usual nighttime routine and flopping into bed as quickly as possible. However, once they are there they both find that their minds are way too active to allow them the sleep they so desperately crave right away. Staring at the ceiling, Danny breaks the silence first.

"You really think this Free World thing is worth a shot?"

"Don't you? What do we have to stay for? So we can continue to work ourselves to death? So you can keep risking your life everyday for the rebels? What do you get from them that we can't get by leaving?" she asks earnestly.

"Trying to leave might be putting us at even more risk," he replies.

"Things with the rebels are going to break bad sooner or later, and then where will we be? In the middle of a war zone again Danny. We've been there, done that. And what about Robbie? In two years he'll be sixteen and whether we want to or not we'll lose him to the military draft. What are we supposed to do, hide him in a hole in our backyard forever?"

"No, of course not. I just...this is all happening so fast..." he complains, his brain sluggishly attempting to wrap around all the different factors.

"Danny, we've both heard about the kind of things they're doing in the military now. Brainwashing. Chemical enhancements that do god knows what. I've seen one of those

spikes they carry in action - he became feral, inhuman. I won't let that happen to our son," she says matter-of-factly. Danny sighs and rubs his temples, trying to assuage the feeling that his head is about to explode.

"Okay. I hear you. You're right, we can't let that happen. We've got the invitation now, so we can figure this out, find the right way to go about it. We'll look for Albert, see if we can find Clint, and if another way doesn't crop up, then we'll go."

"Thank you Danny. I love you." They kiss intimately and Danny looks deep into her eyes.

"I love you too Em. Luckily, we don't have to make any decisions right away. We still have time."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Danny Finn

In the middle of the night, Danny is startled awake by an unfamiliar but persistent buzzing sound. Blearily fumbling around in the dark he eventually finds the source - it's the flip phone from the rebels. Still only half awake, he opens it up to hear Denzil's voice shouting over the mechanical roar of a vehicle's engine, "Danny Boy, code red! You've been compromised!"

"Shit!" exclaims Danny, suddenly fully awake. "What do I do?"

"Tuck your family away and hold tight, mate! We're on our way, but the army's already heading down your street! They're definitely getting there first!" Denzil yells through the background noise. Danny snaps the phone shut and runs to the window where he can see several armoured vehicles rolling down the street just a couple blocks away, flanked by a fleet of hovering drones. Emily leaps out of bed, a panicked expression plastered on her face. Danny spins to look at her, grabbing the go bag he's prepared for just this occasion.

"Grab Robbie and get to the bunker, now! I'll get April!" Bursting into April's room he finds to his relief that the noise has already woken her. April has the device Vanessa gave them clutched firmly in one hand, and when Danny sees it his face falls, a forgotten detail blaring out at him. Danny ushers the other three down the hole and tosses the go bag down after them. Emily reaches into it and starts handing out magnetic eye patches to hide their signals. Danny starts to close up the hatch and Emily hisses up at him, "What are you doing?"

"I left my goddamn patch in the car, Em, they'll find us if I join you. Stay quiet, I'll buy us time." He slams the cover down, cutting off Emily's futile protest, and quickly darts back inside. By the time he is able to see out of the front windows, the military vehicles have rolled to a stop at the base of the driveway, spilling soldiers out onto the street. He hears the drones buzz into perimeter positions around the house, monitoring for signs of life, and he prays that the others get their patches on in time. He takes the steps two at a time to get back to the bedroom, hoping that he can make it seem like he's been sleeping alone in the house. Two heavily armed soldiers make their way up the path and start banging on the front door. Danny desperately tries to slow his breathing, playing out in his mind how long it would take for the noise to wake him. When the logical moment arrives, he waits an extra couple slow counts - he needs to stretch this out as long as he can to give the rebels time to arrive.

The banging on the door grows more insistent, and when he's waited slightly longer than is entirely reasonable, he makes a show of fumbling with the blinds and looking outside. Across the street some neighbours have come outside to see what the ruckus is all about, and are being threatened back inside by soldiers with automatic weapons. From one of the vehicles, a battering ram is being brought out and

manoeuvred up to the door. Danny flicks a few lights on as he makes his way back downstairs, hoping that they will see it and refrain from bashing the door in. He approaches the door and can hear the soldiers outside yelling, "Danny Finn! Homeland Security! We know you're in there! Open up!" Danny snorts derisively at the idea that these goons are 'securing' any kind of 'homeland', and then dons an appropriately sleepy face before turning the lock and cracking the door open slightly. Looking out at the soldiers and feigning confusion, he says, "I'm Danny, what...what's going on?"

Almost before he is finished speaking, the soldiers have pushed the door open and slammed Danny up against the wall, pinning his arms behind his back and handcuffing him. One of them is yelling aggressively in his ear, "Why the fuck did it take you so long to answer the door?"

Hoping that he isn't laying the act on too thick, Danny responds, "It's the middle of the night! I was sleeping! Who...who are you? What do you want?" Instead of answering his question, the soldier drags him out onto the front lawn, kicking his leg to put him on his knees, while a team of soldiers storm inside and begin tearing the place apart. From the front passenger seat of one of the armoured vehicles a man in his sixties steps out, wearing a uniform that demarks him as a general. He has a stocky, muscular frame, about average height. His white hair is kept in a neat buzzcut, which he promptly covers with a uniform cap. As he approaches Danny can see that he has a nasty scar stretching from his left ear down to the corner of his mouth. One of the soldiers emerges from the house, running up to the general and saluting before giving a report. "The house is empty, sir. Target is alone."

The General glares, unconvinced. "Look again!" he barks, and the soldier shouts an affirmation before sprinting back inside the house to relay the order. "Danny Finn," he says, glowering down at Danny on the lawn, "you live with three others: Your wife Emily, your son Robbie, and April Shanaghan. Where are they?"

Danny shrugs his shoulders and casually responds, "They're not here."

The general seizes Danny's hair and pulls his head back, yelling into his face. "Bullshit! Why would they not be here in the middle of the night?" Danny's brain searches wildly for a believable response, while he urgently scans the surrounding area for any sign of the rebels coming to his rescue. Tossing him to the ground, the general continues quietly, gesturing around himself. "What are you looking for Finn? The answer's not out here. I'm not a very patient man, so I'm going to ask you this just one more time - where are they?" Before Danny can answer, another soldier rushes up, handing something to the general.

"Found this in his car, sir." It's the magnetic patch that Danny left behind. The general scrutinizes it for a moment and then issues another order.

"Search him."

It only takes a moment before the soldiers find the flip phone in his pocket. He internally chastises himself for not thinking to toss it down into the bunker with the others.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" says the general, wagging his finds in front of Danny's face. "Got a convenient excuse for these as well?"

Wondering where the hell the rebels are, Danny looks frantically around for any sign of help. The general grunts in annoyance and pokes Danny's forehead with the phone. "Hey, asshole, it's over, got it? Ain't no one out there to help you now." Just as he's about to give up, Danny finally sees it - a small glint off of a neighbouring roof. Grinning slightly he looks back at the general.

"Think again motherfucker."

The moment he speaks these words, a shot rings out and the soldier behind Danny is struck cleanly in the forehead by a bullet, blowing his brains out. He falls stiffly backwards, and then all hell breaks loose. Rebel forces open fire from every direction, having quietly surrounded the area. The general grabs Danny by the shirt and drags him forward to take cover by one of the armoured vehicles. A damaged drone crashes in a fiery heap right where they had been and soldiers begin dropping like flies. The general screams, "Pull back!!" and soldiers from inside the house stream out only to be downed by another hail of bullets. While the general screams orders, Danny slips his hands down and around his feet to get them back in front, where they can be useful. When his captor turns back with a pistol drawn, Danny is ready for him. He quickly strikes the gun out of the old man's hand and spins expertly into him, catching his extended arm with the cuffs and throwing the man over his shoulder, where he crashes heavily onto the pavement. He places a knee into the general's shoulder and twists around, using the captured arm to put him in a painful lock. Not wanting to underdo it, he pulls until the man screams in pain and he feels a sickening pop. The rear vehicle squeals it's wheels and begins to drive backward, several soldiers leaping on to it's chassis in an attempt to escape, only to find themselves engulfed in a ball of flame as a small rocket blows it to pieces.

As the chaos begins to subside, Denzil jogs up, holding a sniper rifle. "Danny Boy! You good?"

"You cut it pretty close, but yeah, I'm good," he says, holding the general tightly while he squirms beneath him.

"Denzil?" the general says through gritted teeth, "Is that you, you piece of shit?"

Danny looks up at Denzil. "You two know each other?"

"We surely do, and if I were in your position Brad, I'd be careful which man with a gun you're insulting," Denzil sneers, kicking the man in the side. A few last gunshots ring out, and Terry Myson sidles up to the group.

"That's enough, Denzil," he warns.

"Like hell it is." Denzil retorts and gives Brad another swift kick. Feeling more secure, Danny slowly releases the shoulder lock. He looks up at Terry.

"Feel like filling me in here?" he asks.

Terry squats down. "This here is Brad Jones. One-time rebel leader. A while back he defected to the military, nearly dismantling our whole operation in exchange for a uniform and a fancy rank." He spits on Brad and stands back up, offering Danny his hand. Denzil slings his rifle over his shoulder and unsheathes a wicked-looking knife.

"And I think Brad here knows just what I think of defectors," he says, tracing the knife down Brad's facial scar. "Don't think you'll be slipping away this time," he whispers, patting Brad's face with the flat of his blade. After pulling Danny up, Terry finds the keys to the cuffs and frees his hands.

"Where's your family Danny? We need to get gone. Can't stay here now, we're out of time."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Washington D.C. (The Heights)

Samar Behi

Samar is in the middle of a wonderful dream where he and Amie wander through a beautiful house. It's full of different rooms, all clean, each one distinct, serving a different purpose. He realizes with joy that the house is theirs, and they laugh heartily as they prance through a room lined entirely with shelves of books of all kinds. It's a paradise, and it's all theirs. Rounding another corner into a gorgeous parlour area, Samar sees Bertie standing near a chess game that Samar recalls, in his dreamlike state, they haven't finished. He runs over to make his move, but before he can, Bertie's demeanor shifts. His smile melts into a frantic expression and he begins to breathe heavily. Concerned, Samar turns to Amie for help, but she is no longer anywhere to be found. Looking back to Bertie, he sees that the older man has a large hammer in his fist, which he uses to begin smashing in the walls of the house. The ground shakes and Samar screams at his friend to stop wrecking his lovely house, but his shouts fall on deaf ears as the walls begin to come tumbling down all around him, and the pounding grows louder and louder.

He wakes with a start, suddenly aware that the noise of the pounding and crashing isn't part of his dream. He had fallen asleep on Bertie's bed while waiting for him to come home, so it takes Samar a moment to orient himself and realize that he is in the common room of their cramped apartment. Rubbing his sleepy eyes, he sees that Bertie does, in fact, have a hammer in his hand, which he is using to haphazardly smash holes in the wall across from the bed. He looks just as frantic as he did in Samar's dream, pulling crumbling pieces of drywall away and wheezing and coughing as ragged breaths take in the ensuing dust. From the sheen of sweat covering him, Samar guesses that he must have been running for some reason - an unusual activity for Bertie. Looking outside through their cracked and dirty window, Samar can see that it is dark outside. It must be the middle of the night.

The buzzing of a police drone thrums into earshot, and Bertie dives to the floor underneath the window just as the scanner sweeps the inside of the apartment before moving on. Bertie releases the breath he had been holding, and then starts suddenly when he notices Samar's dark eyes glinting down at him. "Samar! Oh, thank goodness, you startled me my boy."

"Bertie, what's going on?" Samar asks, his tired voice coming out as more of a croak.

"I'm sorry Samar, I don't have much time to explain. There's something I've hidden here for too long and it's well past time I get it out. Foolish of me to think it was safe. Foolish of me to get caught!" he answers, although it feels as though he is mostly speaking to himself. As Bertie returns to demolishing a section of the wall, a flash of

movement catches the corner of Samar's eye. When he turns to look at what it might be, all he can see is the door to Raoul's room slowly swinging ajar. Peering closer, Samar can just make out Raoul's face. He's lying on the floor and his single eye is staring out at Samar, frozen in an expression of surprise.

Bertie gives out a quiet "Aha!" while rummaging up to his shoulder in the hole he's created. When he pulls his arm out he's holding a small bundle of cloth wrapping something solid. At the same time, Samar leans forward and steps off of the bed, curiously meeting Raoul's blank stare. With a horror that jolts him fully awake, he can see from this new angle that Raoul's neck is twisted at a ghastly angle - he's dead. Samar stumbles backward, and calls out.

"Bertie!"

His old friend twists around at the sound of the boy's terrified voice, grabbing him protectively with the arm holding the bundle and raising his hammer in the other hand. Samar points through the widening gap of the door with a shaking hand, his eyes wide with fright. "Oh god," Bertie whispers as he takes in the grisly scene.

"God can't help you now," comes a voice from the shadowy hallway, cold, malicious, and thick with a Russian accent. A tall, muscular woman emerges from the darkness. Her almost white-blond hair is cropped short and even in the meager light streaming through the window her icy blue eyes flash with a piercing cruelty. Her right hand is resting on a pistol holstered at her hip, and she's dressed in light tactical gear that helps her blend in with her dim surroundings.

"Who are you? What have you done?" demands Bertie with a ferocity that Samar is unaccustomed to hearing from this ever-kind man.

"My name is Zasha Ivanov. I am a very dangerous person, and I have been hired to retrieve *that*," she says, indicating the package in Bertie's hand. "If you give it to me now, I will not silence the boy like I did the others." Samar inches backward into Bertie, trying to make himself as small as possible. He's never been more glad that his mother works nights. Apparently tonight it saved her life.

"If you think I'm letting this fall into the hands of the government after all these years, then you must not have done your homework on me," Bertie warns. His eyes flicker to the open front door of the apartment just a few feet away, calculating how quickly he might be able to get to it.

"Ah ah ah," Zasha says, catching this thought process and halfway unholstering her pistol. "You are a hard man to find, Albert. I nearly had you earlier today near the shelter, before you scurried away like a rat. Luckily for me, but unluckily for the other residents, I was able to track you here. Doubly unlucky for you is that this building is surrounded by the American military. However, I am not one of them. Hand me the device quietly, and you might still make it out of here alive. I will not take it to your stinking government."

A look of puzzlement flashes across Bertie's face. "Then who?"

Zasha huffs impatiently, but hoping to resolve this quickly she explains. "I was hired by powerful man. He will change the world. Runs GreenPlanetX. If you like, I take both you and the device to this man. He seems to think you are too valuable to simply kill, or we would not be talking right now."

"GreenPlanetX? They're murderers. Terrorists. If you want to take it to them, you'll have to take it from my cold, dead hands," Bertie retorts.

"Very well." Zasha says with a shrug, lifting her pistol fully out of it's holster. Just at that moment, the room is flooded with light streaming through the window, startling everyone inside. A seeker drone hovers outside and a voice blares through the loudspeaker.

"ALBERT SHANAGHAN, SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY. REFUSAL TO COMPLY WILL RESULT IN THE USE OF DEADLY FORCE."

Zasha growls with frustration and swings her pistol around, opening fire on the drone. She realizes half a second too late, however, that the drone is heavily armed. As soon as she fires her second round, the outer wall of the apartment is littered with holes when the drone unloads a ferocious barrage of firepower. Zasha is forced to spin back into the hallways to take cover, giving Bertie the fraction of a moment he has been waiting for. Shielding Samar with his own body, he grabs the boy and dives headfirst out the front door and into the hallway.

The two scramble to their feet and Bertie screams, "RUN!!" They sprint down the hallway and careen through the door to the stairwell, just as Zasha slides out the apartment, hot on their heels. Samar is first into the stairwell, where he sees a wall of soldiers storming up from the lower floors.

"Up!!" he yells to Bertie as the front few soldiers raise their weapons to fire. The pair leap up the stairs as a hail of bullets ricochets up from below. They don't stop running until they reach the top floor, where they take a moment to hurriedly stack some furniture in front of the door behind them. Samar begins to pull Bertie down the hallway by the hand, but stops when he notices him wince and limp forward. Looking back, he can see that Bertie's trouser leg is soaked in blood from the thigh down. Whether he was struck by a bullet or a stray piece of shrapnel is unclear, but he is bleeding heavily and running much further no longer seems to be an option. Placing Bertie's arm around his shoulder he helps him limp into the room with their special book cabinet and eases him on to the couch cushions.

"Samar, I'm sorry, I never meant to get any of you involved in this," Bertie says, gritting his teeth against the pain in his leg.

"Bertie, you've gotta tell me what's going on! Who's that woman? What is it everyone wants? Why are you in so much trouble?" Samar asks, speaking almost too quickly to be understood. In the background they can hear a pounding at the stairwell door as those on the other side start to force their way through.

"I suppose it doesn't matter much anymore, all the secrecy. Samar, my full name is Albert Shanagan. I used to work for the rebels. One day I came across something important. It was a device, an antidote device that would allow whoever had it to break through the viral firewall that is shutting the planet out of the satellite grid. I immediately reported my finding to my superiors, but something went wrong. I guess the government had someone listening on the inside because before I knew what was happening I was under siege by the military. In desperation I removed my implant, took the device, and ran. I abandoned everything and hid, waiting for the rebels to make enough headway, but I waited too goddamn long! Everything I did was for nothing," he finishes, his head sinking into his hands.

"That's what this is? The antidote device?" asks Samar, pointing to the package Bertie has cradled against him. Bertie nods solemnly. The sound of splintering wood echoes loudly from down the hall as the soldiers begin forcing their way through their makeshift barricade. "Bertie, listen to me, the game isn't over till checkmate is called, right? Well we still have a move left. Give it to me, I can still run."

"Samar, no, it's too dangerous."

"Shoulda thought of that before, old man. Time to be decisive, give it to me!" Samar yells. He can hear that the soldiers have made it through the door and are sweeping down the hallway. Bertie pulls Samar in close and speaks into his ear quickly.

"Listen to me carefully. You need to get this to Terry Myson, he's the leader of the rebels. I know you know some of their hiding places. Give it only to him. My name will get you close, this will prove you're from me." He slips a miraculously still-functioning old digital watch off of his wrist and into Samar's hand. "Terry Myson, got it?" he says, eyes wild. Samar nods, committing the name to memory. Across the room there is a crash as Zasha Ivanov breaks through the fire escape window and rolls to her feet, her expression furious. Bertie pushes the antidote device into Samar's arms and yells, "Go boy, GO!"

Samar spins on his toes, tucking the precious package inside his jacket pocket. There aren't many places left to go, but he has a home turf advantage. As Zasha sets her sights on him he sprints perpendicularly across from where she is advancing, and in a deft move slides through a low hole in the wall into the adjacent room. In a flash he's back on his feet, years of experience clambering over the rooftops lending him the agility he so badly needs now. Making a break for an opening in the outer wall of the building, he grabs a drainpipe that he stopped using a while ago due to how loose it had become. Without a second's delay, the top of the pipe comes away from the wall in his hands just as Zasha breaks through the wall like a wrecking ball. With no time to waste, he leaps from the edge of the building, using the pipe to vault across the alley to the lower rooftop next door. Hitting the surface roughly he rolls over a few times before pushing himself up. He glances back for a moment to see Zasha backing up, clearly intent on making the jump across under her own power. Then he turns and runs.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Danny Finn

Danny sits awkwardly in the middle of Emily and April, who are both staring daggers at Denzil. He'd hoped that in the intervening years since the depot raid the ladies' hostility toward his rebel superior might have abated somewhat, but it appears to be burning as brightly as ever. It doesn't help that Denzil seems to find their stares hilarious and can barely keep himself from giggling while he flashes them his best, most charming apologetic smile. The group of them, along with Robbie and Terry, are traveling in the back of one of the rebels' nondescript vans to an undisclosed stronghold.

Sean Torres, up in the driver's seat as usual, shouts back a warning for everyone to hold on. Intrigued, Danny peers through the windshield to see where they are heading. He half expects Terry or Denzil to deny him the line of sight, but when they don't, he guesses that there isn't much point in hiding anything from them any longer. Sean picks up speed as the headlights illuminate a storefront dead ahead. It's an old barbershop, complete with the colourful spiral column, but it looks like it's been boarded up and abandoned for a long time. They drive closer and closer, and Danny braces himself between his seat and the van's ceiling. Sean doesn't appear to be slowing down or preparing to turn. Glancing with concern at the others, he catches Denzil grinning like a wolf. Danny briefly notes with disapproval that Denzil always seems to find amusement in other people's discomfort, but the thought only has time to flit momentarily across his mind as the storefront looms dangerously close and he feels certain that they are about to crash headfirst into it.

At the very last second the storefront splits in the middle, and the two halves swing inward to reveal a tunnel pitched at a steep angle downward. The van mounts the curb and roars through the narrow opening with barely a few inches clearance on either side. As soon as the van is through the false storefront, it rapidly swings closed again. Unless someone was watching very closely, the van would have for all intents and purposes disappeared into thin air. Greatly impressed by Sean's expert precision driving, Danny lets out a whoop and pats the muscular man's shoulder in congratulations. Terry and Sean share a chuckle at Danny's excitement, and as the van descends in the tunnel Terry offers an explanation.

"Washington D.C. used to be connected by an extensive underground tunnel network: aqueducts, subways, sewers, ventilation shafts, pedestrian walkways and more. The damn things went nearly everywhere. When the government initiated the quarantine zones, a large number of those tunnels were collapsed. It wouldn't do to have people crossing from zone to zone underground, and they didn't nearly have the manpower to monitor the city above as well as the city below. Luckily for us, the place was a goddamned labyrinth, and years ago we found some disused tunnel systems that

we could use to navigate unseen around the city. At first, we were limited to just moving around The Heights, where many people had taken to living in forgotten subterranean areas. That was helpful enough, but over time we've been able to excavate further and further, extending the range of our operations significantly."

Fascinated, Robbie pipes up. "That's how you guys are able to ghost the army all the time, isn't it? That's incredible!"

Terry gives him a warm smile. "Got it in one kiddo. Our guess is that once they collapsed the main tunnel routes, the government didn't bother to keep monitoring much more than the sewers and waterways. That left a lot of unseen pathways for us to exploit."

The tunnel they are in levels out and Danny estimates that by now they must nearly a hundred feet underground. "So where are we headed now?" he asks.

"In a few minutes we'll come out into our main complex. We've got units stationed all over the city, each with their tunnels rigged to blow in case they're ever discovered, but this complex is our principal base of operations. Your family will be safe there for now, until we can make other arrangements," Terry explains. Unimpressed, Emily speaks up for the first time since they were bundled into the van.

"What do you mean by 'other arrangements'? What are we supposed to do now? Where are we supposed to go?"

Denzil leans forward, "Emily, believe me when I - "

"Not you," Emily says, sharply cutting him off, "don't you *dare* speak to me you psychopath."

Denzil's face shifts from surprise to a mockery of hurt feelings, and then he cocks an eyebrow at Danny. "Fiesty! I like that." He winks, and Danny has to place an arm in front of Emily to stop her from lunging forward with violent intent.

"That's enough, Denzil!" chides Terry, giving his lieutenant a stern look of warning. "We didn't want this to happen any more than you did Emily," Terry continues, "but our hand has been forced. Based on the chatter we've been picking up, Danny's intel about Albert is looking more and more likely." As he says this, April grips Danny's leg tightly, suddenly hanging on Terry's every word. "We don't think they've found the antidote device yet, but if they find Albert and force him to reveal it's location, the rebellion will essentially be over."

April interrupts Terry with a desperate plea, "Then we should be out there looking for him! Not hiding underground!!"

"April, I assure you we have scouts combing The Heights for him as we speak, we're doing everything we can," he says in an attempt to calm her, "but the fact remains that we can't let the government get their hands on you either. If they have you, then they have leverage they can use to draw Albert out and make him talk. We think that's likely part of the reason they showed up at your place tonight." April shrinks back a bit, hearing the sense of what Terry is saying. "Chin up though! If they're that keen on

getting you, there's a chance that means they're still looking for Albert too. He's hidden for this long, hopefully we'll get to him first. For now, we need to keep you, Emily, and Robbie out of sight."

Emily's look of concern re-emerges, "What about Danny?"

Terry gives her an uncomfortable look and then says, "We'll talk about that in a minute, we're just about there."

The van is suddenly flooded with light as it emerges into a cavernous space that, despite it being the middle of the night, is buzzing with activity. They pull quickly into a small bay filled with other vehicles to park, and then emerge into the rebel base. Denzil and Sean peel off and disappear down a side hallway while the others stare at what now lies before them. Danny is blown away by the scale of it all. In the centre is an open rectangular area that descends for several storeys, criss-crossed with various bridges, wires, and electronic lifts. At the bottom is a large flat space where people are gathering. All around the edges, on every floor, there are rooms of all kinds: hallways, tunnel entrances, seating areas, communal eating spaces, and more. It gives the impression of a massive underground mall, and Danny is reminded of childhood shopping trips with his mother in similar places. Noticing that many of the people are not wearing the protective magnetic eyepatches, he glances around and can see that much of the structure is lined with the same faraday mesh wiring that he noticed in the garage the first time the rebels took him.

"Welcome to rebel headquarters," Terry says, spreading his arms wide. "You'll be safe here. We've taken strict precautions to make sure that this place is shielded from Network signals, sound bleed, and heat signatures. You'll notice that everything down here is hardwired; your implants won't function, so you'll be okay without your patches for now."

Eagerly freeing their covered eyes to better take in their surroundings, the group is led on a short tour as they cross the base. Terry shows them a weapons depot, several training and workout areas, a school for the children living here, and many of the amenities of regular life; including a barbershop/salon, a few small marketplaces, various eating establishments and one or two drinking holes. Curious, Danny inquires as to the number of people that the base holds.

"We've grown significantly in the past couple of years. We currently have about 2000 people permanently living in this base, but at any time there's likely to be many more passing through for operations. Across the city we have quite a few smaller hubs, but nothing as established as this," explains Terry. "We've also been absorbing and connecting with other rebel movements across the country," he continues, as they enter a large room at the far end of the base filled with screens, old computers, and obsolete technology. Danny can see maps on the walls with pins demarking rebel bases in numerous states and cities. The room is the busiest one they have seen by far, with people rushing back and forth delivering reports, watching video feeds, monitoring

analytics, communicating on old radios or phones, and gathering for intense discussions.

Terry leads them through the throng towards an office at the back of the room. As they enter, Danny hears a familiar voice ring out. "Oh dang, look what the cat dragged in!" LaToya cries out from a desk that she has her feet propped up on. It's strange for Danny to see her out of her usual tactical gear. She's dressed in multi-coloured striped thigh-high knit socks, cutoff denim dungarees, a bright pink t-shirt, and a red bandana covering her afro. The only things Danny recognizes on her are the combat boots and her ever-present headphones.

"Emily, Robbie, April, I'd like to introduce you to LaToya, my handler," Danny says, gesturing her way, "LaToya, this is the family."

LaToya swings her feet off the desk and springs up to standing. "S'up," she offers casually, tossing a lollipop up from her hand and catching it effortlessly in her mouth.

Robbie looks completely enamoured by the colourful, confident young woman. "Are you really my dad's boss?" he asks.

"You bet yer butt, little man," she says with a wink.

"Awesome," Robbie comments under his breath.

LaToya comes over to Robbie and gives him a fist bump. "You into music, little man?" she asks. Robbie shyly gives a small nod, and LaToya crooks a finger, motioning him into an adjoining room. As they go she places her headphones over his ears, saying "This is my own mix, lemme know what you think."

Once they are out of earshot, Emily rounds on Terry. "Okay, we've done your little tour, very impressive, now out with it. What do you want from Danny?"

"Right to business, I can respect that, we don't have much time anyway," he begins. "We've done our best here to make comprehensive plans to eventually seize control of the government. But if they get their hands on the antidote device, then none of those plans will matter. The U.S. government will once again be the dominant power, not just here, but worldwide."

Interjecting, April asks, "What's the antidote device?"

Terry gives her a sympathetic look before answering. "It's what your husband sacrificed himself for. The viral firewall that cut the world off from the satellite grid changed everything, and severed those in the ruling class from their most potent tools. No one knows for sure what caused it. Some speculate that it was a Chinese cyber-attack that spun out of control, but whatever the reason actually was, the world's best programmers failed to come up with a solution. There were rumours that the original hackers created an antidote, intended to confer control of the planet to whoever they worked for. In the chaos of everything that ensued, such an antidote - if it existed - disappeared. Against all odds, it seems Albert found it, and gave up everything to make sure that the military didn't get their hands on it. We can't let his sacrifice, your sacrifice, go to waste.

"The fact that they came for you means that it's very likely Albert is out there even now. He's the only one who's seen what's on that device. The possibility that either he or the device itself might be captured means that our timeline has been significantly altered. The time to act has come, whether we're ready or not."

"So, what has this got to do with Danny?" asks Emily, impatiently.

"Well, tomorrow we need to hit Reuger Arms. If we're to survive a direct assault on government forces, we need the arms and armour stored there. And perhaps equally important, we need to prevent them from propping up the government any further. Danny, you're the man on the inside with the access codes we need."

"Wait - you want to send him back into Reuger?" asks an incredulous Emily. Danny tries to calm her with a gentle hand on her shoulder, but she shrugs him off. "No, I'm sorry, absolutely not. They just came for us in our *home*. Surely the people at Reuger are going to be looking for him. He'll be arrested before he's through the front door!"

"We have reason to believe that might not be the case," Terry says, cautiously. "Denzil's in the middle of interrogating Brad Jones as we speak to confirm this, but we're pretty sure that it was April they were coming for. Not Danny. If that's so, then Brad is the only one who knows that Danny is working for us. We have a very small window, right now, to get Danny in that building before what happened at your house is properly reported."

"That's not very convincing," Emily retorts.

"Em, let's just hear them out," Danny suggests, but Emily rounds on him.

"Are you kidding me? You don't think you've done enough for them? Put us all at risk enough? There's no way I'm going to let this happen, Danny!"

Exasperated, but unable to disagree with what Emily is saying, Danny turns to Terry, "Do you really need me? I know you've got other people on the inside at Reuger, why do I have to go back?"

"It's gotta be you, Danny," Terry explains, "it's a simple job, setting a gate on a timer to open for us when it's time to attack. Ideally, you're in and out, but you're the only one with authorization to do what we need."

"You can't hack in? Or just blow the gate?" Emily asks.

"I wish we could, I really do, but this is a heavily armed munitions factory. Surprise is our only advantage. If we blow the gate, they'll be on top of us before we can even breach the main building. As for hacking in, if you've got a way to emulate your husband's biometric scan, I'm all ears."

"And what about my family?" Danny inquires.

"They'll be safe down here as long as you'd like to stay. You won't be able to go topside for a while, but if all goes according to plan, soon enough that won't matter," Terry responds.

Danny takes a deep breath and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Terry, April, can you give Em and I the room for a minute? We need to talk privately."

Terry nods curtly. "I can give you a few minutes, but we're short on time. Your shift starts in about 2 hours, and you'll need to be there if we're gonna make our window."

Once they are alone in the room, Danny turns to Emily, who has her arms crossed and wears a stony facial expression. "Em...I think I've gotta do this."

"No. Forget it. April already lost her husband to these assholes; I'm not losing you too."

"And if I don't, where will we be? What if they don't get to Albert in time? This might be our one chance to make a difference in this world. To make a better world for our son."

"There's already a better world for our son!" Emily exclaims. "The Free World, Danny. We thought we had time, but we don't. I'm not staying down here like rats in a sinking ship. If their little revolution doesn't go as planned, we'll have no escape. So let's go!"

"And how are we supposed to do that? We have nothing Em. No car, no travel documents, hell we don't even have a change of clothes. We have no idea how far the journey is going to be. How far are we going to get with everyone looking for us?"

Emily slumps, her face starting to look desperate as she comes in close. "Danny...I can't lose you...."

Danny wraps her up in a hug. "I know babe," he says, his sleep-deprived brain searching for an answer. Suddenly an idea occurs to him. "But there is one thing we have."

"What?" Emily asks quietly.

"Leverage. I think I have a way to get us out of all of this," he answers with excitement creeping back into his voice. The two of them spend the next few minutes hashing out the details of Danny's plan. Emily isn't happy about it, but she agrees that it's the best option they have at the moment. Once they are finally in agreement, they call Terry and April back in.

"Okay Terry," Danny begins, "we've made a decision. I'll do it. I'll go back and open your gate, but we have some conditions."

"What do you need?" asks Terry uncertainly.

"My family isn't staying here. We're leaving. I'm not gonna tell you where and I'm not gonna tell you why, but we need a vehicle. Ideally good for long distances, and with at least a bit of protection. We don't know what we're gonna be facing where we're going."

"That's it, just a car?"

"And supplies for a few days' trip: a change of clothes, food, water, fuel, a first aid kit, and safe passage out of the city. You'll keep them clear of the danger zone, and when I've set the timer, you'll escort me to them. You get what you need, and we get out. That's the deal," finishes Danny, crossing his arms in finality.

"Are you sure we can't convince you to stay?" Terry pleads, "I don't know where you're planning to go, but the world out there isn't what it used to be. It can be a dangerous place. Here, you'd have everything you need. We can protect you. And lord knows we could use people like you in the coming fight."

"We're done fighting," Emily says seriously.

Terry thinks for a moment and then finally relents. "Okay then. I can hardly blame you for wanting out. We'll meet your conditions. It's the least we can do after everything you've done for us, Danny. We'll miss you, but I wish you and your family safe travels once we're done. If you change your minds and want to come back, you'll always be welcome."

The Finns and April are shown to some private quarters where they get cleaned up and are provided with a few sets of clean clothes. While Danny and Emily are briefed on the specifics of the plan, April spends some time chatting with Terry about both Albert and Clint. Terry reassures her that they will do everything they can to find both of them and gives her the link to a digital lockbox where she can check in to see if they have found anything moving forward. This greatly reduces her anxiety about leaving, but she understands that by staying she would actually be more of a liability. Next, everyone heads to the parking bay. Emily, April, and Robbie are shown to a large, armoured military vehicle that Sean Torres has just finished loading up with supplies. He explains that out on the open highways, a regular car would most likely gather more attention than an apparent military vehicle, so in a way the would-be tank that they have been assigned will actually be less conspicuous, while affording them more protection.

"Not joining us LaToya? I have to say I'd feel a bit safer with you around."

"I bet you would, you have a knack for getting yourself into trouble," she replies, "but I'll be with you in spirit. On big operations like this I stay here, running the comms and coordinating between rebel cells. There aren't many people Terry trusts with the big picture."

"So there actually is a big picture?" Danny jokes, knowing it's a feeble attempt. Thankfully, LaToya gives a small laugh anyway and rolls her eyes.

"Listen," she says uncomfortably, "I'm not good with this kind of thing, but...well...here, take this." She presses a small cylinder of metal into his hand.

"What's this?" he asks.

"It's one of the newest EMP grenades we've acquired. I just...you know...if you get into trouble I just wanted to....make sure...."

Danny can't help but laugh at her awkwardness. "Why LaToya, I didn't take you for the sentimental type!"

"Just...shut up!...I mean...goddamnit just watch your back, okay? I won't be there to do it for you anymore," she eventually manages to stammer out before turning and storming off.

"Thanks LaToya!" he calls after her, and then says under his breath, "I'll miss you too, kid." He examines the small cylinder, noting the trigger system and then tucking it safely away in his boot, where he's least likely to lose it.

Next, he sidles up to Robbie and gives him a big one-armed hug from the side. In an unusual show of affection from the teenager, Robbie spins into him and wraps him up in a big bear hug. "I'll be with you before you know it, okay Robbie?" Danny says to him. "I need you to take care of your mom and April until I meet back up with guys. Can you do that for me?"

"I promise," Robbie says, "I love you Dad, be careful, okay?"

"I will."

After that, it's Emily's turn to hug Danny, and pulling away from each other feels harder than it ever has before. "Don't be a hero," she begs him, "You get in and get out, okay?"

"Don't worry, I don't want to be there any longer than I have to. I love you Em, and I'll be available over the Network link the whole time I'm there. I'll message the second I'm on my way."

"You'd better." she says, they share a tender kiss, and then it's time to go. Emily takes the driver's seat in their vehicle. She had some experience driving similar ones for medical evacuations when she was in the military, so it makes sense for her to take the wheel here. They have a pre-programmed map on the dashboard's built-in screen to get them safely through the tunnel network to the rally point, and Emily doesn't waste any time gunning the engine and heading out. Danny jumps into a much smaller car driven by Denzil, who will be chaperoning him to Reuger, leading the initial scouting team, and then delivering him to his family after the job is done. While Danny's always found Denzil a little crazy, at least he's their crazy. He's glad to know he has someone so prominent in the rebellion watching over him the whole way, especially if he needs help getting back out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Danny Finn

Walking up to the front doors of Reuger Arms after Denzil drops him off a block away feels unnatural for Danny. He's always entered through the parking garage in the mornings, and he hopes that it doesn't draw too much attention. Although, if anyone's aware of what happened last night, it won't matter what door he walks in. With that not-so-pleasant thought rattling around in his head, he braces himself and strides in, trying to look confident.

Shelley Crimson is at the front desk as usual, and she smiles as Danny enters the building. "Danny! Good morning, what a nice surprise! How's it going?" she says cheerfully.

"Dang clunker of a car stalled out a few blocks away," he reports, praying that his cover story doesn't sound too forced. "I'm not late, am I?"

"Ugh, what a way to start the day! I'm so sorry! And don't worry, you've got plenty of time to sign in before you're logged as late. All the same, I won't keep you. I'm sure you have important things to get to today," she says, and Danny is slightly unsettled by the emphasis she places on the last sentence. However, he chalks it up to his frayed nerves and just gives her a smile as he heads back to the warehouses.

The plan is to appear as if it's a normal day of work for the first little while. At around 10:30 am, he is to take an inspection walkaround on the warehouse floor, which wouldn't be terribly unusual, and set the timer for the loading bay door to open at the appointed time. When Danny finishes clocking in he notes that the clock reads 8:02 am and his palms start to sweat as the reality of being exposed for the next two and a half hours begins to set in. Trying not to think about it, he goes about his morning routine as usual, beginning with a large mug of coffee. After barely getting any sleep last night the dark brown concoction feels like the nectar of the gods. Even though it's still a bit too hot, he drinks eagerly, ignoring the light scalding his tongue receives - to him it's worth it.

He nearly chokes on the hot liquid when Neil calls out from across the room. "Hello Mr. Finn, you look tired, is everything okay?"

"Hi Neil," Danny replies, trying hard not to grind his teeth in annoyance. The last thing he needs is this little twerp antagonising him, especially today, and extra especially considering those suspicious absences, but luckily good old Harold comes to his rescue.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you some manners, kid?" he chastises Neil, "Why don't you mind your work instead of asking your superiors rude questions? Geez." Neil offers a flustered, half-spoken apology and turns back to his virtual station looking horrified. "He's not wrong though Dan," Harold mentions, coming in and nudging Danny with his elbow, "You look like shit. You're not in trouble, are ya?"

The comment throws Danny for a second, and he's unsure how to answer. Harold catches his puzzled expression and elaborates. "With Emily? Last time I looked like you do, I'd spent the night tossing and turning on the couch after I forgot my anniversary with Lucy. Not something I recommend doing, by the way!" he says and then roars with laughter.

Danny forces a smile onto his face, "No, no, nothing like that. Just a boring old bout of insomnia I'm afraid."

"Well, I'm glad it's nothing serious, though I coulda used some entertainment. It would have been nice to have you be the one with the exciting story for a change," Harold says with a sigh.

"Sorry to disappoint, buddy, same old boring life over here," Danny sighs right back. They settle into their familiar back and forth of small talk as they set up the workload for the day. During a mundane task which Danny loathes - It suddenly occurred to him that he'll never do any of this ever again; his duties begin to adopt a strange nostalgic tone. Harold is his friend, and he'll miss *him* at the least, if not the grind of the work they'd done together.

Although the wait feels interminable, eventually the clock ticks over to 10:30, and Danny announces that he's going to head out for the inspection. On the way out he's overcome with a need to say something, anything, to Harold in the way of a parting expression. "Hey Harry," he calls out from the doorway.

"Yeah boss?" Harold responds.

Danny hesitates for a moment, unsure of what he could possibly say, and then simply says, "Hold down the fort, mate." Harold looks at him like he's got a screw loose, and so he just shakes his head and leaves, simultaneously feeling stupid for saying anything, and wanting to run across the room and hug his friend goodbye.

Despite his nerves, the actual process of setting the timer down at the loading bay is extremely simple. However, once he completes the task and signals the green light to the rebels with his flip phone, three things happen in quick succession. The first is an implant alert from Manny:

DANNY, MY OFFICE, ASAP

He stares at the message with helpless dread. The lack of one of Manny's nicknames for him sets alarm bells ringing in his head. Something isn't right, and so he quickens his pace. The faster he can make it to an exit the better, and he jumps into the nearest elevator out of the warehouses.

As soon as the elevator door closes, the second thing happens - an incoming call from Shelley Crimson. Not wanting to tip his hand just yet, he answers the call. "Shelley, what can I do for you?"

"Hey Danny, remember how you asked me to keep an eye out for Neil?" she asks, and Danny can't help but notice something uncertain in her voice.

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, odd thing, he just tried to leave again," she explains.

"I wouldn't worry about it Shell, but thanks for letting me know," he replies quickly, hoping to get off the call.

"That's not the odd thing Danny. When he tried to leave, the front doors were locked. I just checked the system, and it looks like pretty much the whole building is locked down for some reason," she says, her voice now gathering anxiety.

That's when the third thing happens - a ping on the flip phone. When he opens it, the message displayed there from LaToya kicks his brain into high gear:

LOST CONTACT WITH SCOUT TEAM. DENZIL NOT RESPONDING. GET OUT.

He snaps the phone closed, running through his options. "Shelley, you said pretty much the whole building. What do you mean by that? Is there still a way out?" he asks, pulling a cold calm into himself.

Shelley is quiet for a moment and then responds confidently, "Your best bet is the parking garage, but you'd better move it. It probably won't stay open long."

"Thanks Shell, I owe you. Take Neil and find somewhere to hide. Things are about to get dicey," he says, then severs the connection.

As he does so, the elevator door opens to reveal a soldier waiting for him. "Danny Finn, I need you to come with me," he says in a commanding tone. The young man hasn't yet unholstered his pistol however, and Danny wastes no time taking advantage of that mistake. He surges forward, and drives his right hand up under the soldier's chin. Using his own momentum he grabs the soldier's head, and smashes it against the wall behind him. As it rebounds with a sickening crack, Danny drives his knee into his face with full force. The soldier's nose bursts into a torrent of blood and his body goes limp. He tosses the rapidly folding body across the hall into the elevator and grabs the handgun to arm himself. He presses every button on the elevator's panel before dashing back into the hallway and continuing to stalk towards the parking garage.

Accessing his mental map of the compound he chooses the shortest path he can think of and sets off. Steadying his breathing, he moves as stealthily as he can. One or two times he has to wait for voices around a corner to subside before he makes the turn, but for the most part the route he chose is blissfully unpopulated. Finally, the elevator to the parking garage appears at the end of a hallway. Dashing down it, he breathes a sigh of relief and smacks the button to bring the lift to his floor. However, as the lift arrives and the doors slide open, he is greeted with the surprising sight of Denzil's wolf-like smile. Before Danny can even process the sight, Denzil rams the butt of a rifle into his temple. His vision swims with stars and the world lurches violently as

he stumbles backward. Denzil stands over him, and in a sing-song voice says, "Nighty-night," before raising the butt of the rifle once again. When it comes down, Danny's world turns black.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Terry Myson

Terry squints against the sunlight streaming down into the street as he leans out from his shadowy hiding spot in an alleyway. If it were any other day he might rejoice in the beautiful weather, but as it is he almost wishes for some cloud cover to mask their approach. *No turning back now.* He signals to his infiltration team, indicating to ready themselves. If Danny Finn's done his job properly, then the loading dock bay door should be opening in just a few minutes. The soldiers look eager to begin, and Terry experiences a sudden moment of sadness knowing that he has instilled this thirst for battle in them. Once this is all over, he intends to stop the fighting for good, but he knows that there will likely be a lot of bloodshed before they get there.

The modified cell phone strapped to the inside of his forearm suddenly buzzes to life. He reads the message from LaToya, indicating that the scout team hasn't reported in and that attempts to contact Denzil have been unsuccessful. Almost immediately the radio earpiece he is wearing squawks to life with Sean's voice.

"Terry, you seeing that message?" he asks.

"I see it. Could just mean that they entered a dead zone for reception," Terry replies hopefully.

"Or it could mean something's wrong. Terry, you could be walking into a trap."

"That was always a possibility."

"I don't like it," Sean insists, "I think you should pull back."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you're not thinking straight. Even if it *is* a trap, we don't get another chance at this. We need the firepower inside that factory, or everything is dead in the water, including us. I'm not going to sacrifice this opportunity on the off chance that we lost the advance team when it's just as likely they have bad reception. That's final," Terry replies flatly, while simultaneously typing a response to LaToya:

KEEP TRYING TO GET THROUGH

He doesn't like being so firm with Sean, but he knows that if he isn't, then Sean is likely to let his emotions cloud his judgement. He's overprotective of Terry, which makes him an excellent bodyguard, and a wonderful partner, but a liability on the battlefield. Sean needs to know that he has to play the role he is assigned in this operation: commanding the reserve forces from the rally point. If things go badly, they're going to need his secondary wave to lay down suppressive fire to assist with extraction. They'll pull what supplies they can and regroup. But hopefully it won't come to that.

Terry checks the time again; his countdown is rapidly approaching zero. Readjusting his gear, he waits, intensely focused on the loading dock. His radio sparks to life again, spurring a flash of minor irritation.

"Terry, come in, " Sean's voice whispers into his ear.

"Not now, Sean, we're moments away here," Terry responds impatiently.

"You're gonna want to hear this. Some kid just showed up making a fuss, insisting on seeing you. Not sure where he came from, and he won't give us any information, but he says he has something for you from 'Bertie'. Terry, I made sure, he means Shanaghan."

The implication of this message momentarily stuns Terry.

Could it be a trick? Terry wonders, If not, this could be the break we've been looking for.

But the timing couldn't be worse, as his forearm buzzes again:

TEN SECONDS, WE'RE A GO

Fuck, he thinks to himself, I need more time....

But he doesn't have any. He signals the countdown to his squadron, too many thoughts streaming through his head at once. "Sean, under no circumstances are you to let that kid out of your sight until I get there," he orders. "I'll see you soon."

Then he tears the earpiece out and shuts the radio off. He can't risk being distracted during the initial assault.

He signals the squadron forward and begins to storm across the street, praying that the door opens. Like clockwork, the heavy loading bay door begins to rattle open, splitting apart like Moses parting the Red Sea. He refocuses his attention as they enter the compound, entering into darkness and silence, ostensibly undetected. The first soldiers through the door take out the cameras with silenced weapons and the rest of the team floods into the warehouse, taking up defensive positions.

The primary breach team moves forward to the inner doors as the outer doors begin to lumber closed. Terry watches them closely, unnerved in the suffocating silence of the frustratingly empty warehouse. While they were always going to need to breach the inner compound to access the most useful inventory, it would have been comforting to know that they could have grabbed supplies from the warehouse during a retreat. Now, if they can't seize the entire building, they might not retrieve anything of worth. Checking the status of his weapons out of habit to reassure himself, he squints through the darkness at the team that has reached the far end of the room.

Knowing that they should have opened the door already, he starts to creep forward. The breach team looks back toward him wearing slightly confused expressions and Terry realizes with horror why. The inner doors, which should have been unlocked, are chained shut. In the silence around him, he begins to hear a whirring sound that makes his blood run cold. The outer doors finish closing with a dull thud, plunging the warehouse into full, inky blackness, through which Terry can now see the unmistakable, unblinking red lights associated with armed drones begin to light up all around them...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Samar Behi

Samar runs his fingers over the face of the digital watch that Bertie pressed into his hand before they split up. Turning it over he reads the inscription again:

"To Dad, with love, Clint and April"

The words cause so many questions to spring to his young mind.

Did Bertie have a family? Children? What happened to them? Why had he never spoken of them?

He recalls the fatherly disposition that Bertie always had around him. Had it been painful for the old man to play such a role in Samar's life when he no longer had his own children to take care of, or was that part of the reason he had taken such a shine to Samar in the first place? Even that qualifier, *old man*, was now called into question. He studied the memory of Bertie's face, recognizing that the bushy salt and pepper beard, Cyke scarring, and general wear and tear of the kind of life they lead could easily have aged his face significantly, disguising how old he truly is. Summoning Bertie's face proves to be too painfully raw, and so pushing it and the probing questions aside, he refocuses on the task at hand.

He had been lucky overnight. Using his knowledge of the labyrinthine routes through the Heights, he had been able to shake off Zasha's pursuit - at least for now. The woman was like an unstoppable machine and Samar was now properly terrified of her. Finding the rebels had been another unbelievable stroke of luck. The secret pathways they used to navigate the Heights had been extremely active for some reason, and after only a few hours of silent observation he had located someone who seemed to be in direct contact with Terry Myson.

The man, who identified himself as Sean Torres, was immediately skeptical of Samar, but after hearing him out and seeing the inscription on the watch, Sean seemed mostly convinced that he was telling the truth about who had sent him. He also seemed immensely frustrated that Samar refused to give him any more information, insisting on speaking to Terry in person. The device tucked safely away in an inside pocket will remain concealed until he completes his mission. He won't let Bertie down. He knows he owes him that much, and much more besides.

Sean, who has been radioing Terry about Samar, is suddenly shouting into the transmitter.

"Terry? Terry! Come in!" Then a pause as he waits for a response. "Damnit!" he shouts, tossing the radio aside. He strokes the ample stubble on his cheek while thinking for a minute, muttering quietly under his breath and occasionally rubbing at red-rimmed eyes.

Before he can come to a conclusion on whatever he's considering, Samar sees another soldier sprinting full-bore into the centre of the outpost, directly toward Sean.

"Sir! I don't know how, but they've found us! Military forces are inbound, they'll be here any minute!"

Sean springs into action issuing orders, looking far calmer than he has a right to be, though Samar is sure he can see panic behind his eyes. "Alright troops, gear up and get into defensive positions there, there, and there," he shouts, indicating several entryways into the area they are occupying. "Weapons free, hold them off!" He grabs a nearby soldier and sits him at the small desk where the radio sits among some other equipment. "Message headquarters, let them know we're being ambushed and are abandoning position ASAP," his voice drops slightly as he thinks out loud, "they knew we were coming, knew our position...someone gave us away..." His head snaps back to the soldier furiously typing on a small device, "Tell LaToya we've been compromised, she should sound the alarm and evacuate headquarters immediately! If they know we're here, they probably know about HQ. Tell her to get everyone out and rendezvous at rally point Delta where she should wait for further instructions."

Samar ducks his head as the first gunshots ring out, followed by a cacophony of noise from all directions. An explosion lights up the far end of an alleyway and the screams of injured soldiers begin to rise like a terrifying chorus. A drone appears over the lip of a nearby building and begins to rip the outpost apart with a barrage of bullets. Sean rolls out of the way as the command station is riddled with holes, instantly killing the soldier still typing out orders, and Samar whispers a small prayer that enough of the message got through. He's never witnessed this kind of carnage, and he presses himself as small as possible against the wheel of a truck parked beside him. Sean comes up from his roll with a gun already drawn, taking the offending drone down with several well-placed shots.

"What direction are they coming from?" he screams to a nearby officer.

"Every direction, sir, we're surrounded!" comes the unwelcome reply.

As more drones begin to crest the rooftops all around, Sean seems to come to a decision. "Alright troops, we can't stay here! We're going to move in on Reuger! Terry needs our help!"

Firing in all directions at the encroaching drones, the troops form a protective circle using anything they can as cover. Sean dashes over and grabs Samar by the wrist, pulling him up. "Okay kid, you wanna see Terry Myson, here's your chance. You stick to me like glue, and I'll get you through this, got it?"

Samar nods, and crowds in close to the enormous man. Sean grabs an equally enormous weapon from a crate nearby and directs his troops' attention to one of the exit points. "I'm gonna punch a hole, and when I do, I need everyone to move!" he yells, and the soldiers give knowing nods. As Sean levels the cannon-like weapon and prepares to fire, Samar realizes with horror what he is about to fire. It's an EMP grenade launcher. If the antidote device is caught in a blast from one of those grenades it will be destroyed. While Sean's attention is diverted, Samar makes a desperate break in the opposite

direction, dodging around and vaulting over soldiers as the launcher fires it's first round. Disregarding the danger all around, Samar pumps his legs faster than he ever has before, making a break for a nearby open manhole. He leaps in even as soldiers grab for him, yelling at him to come back. He pulls everything in tight as he ricochets off the inside of the hole and bounces down, landing hard. Ignoring the screaming pain in his joints he rises to his feet.

A noise behind him sends a chill down his spine and he spins to see a military drone already in the process of scanning him. He scrambles away, but it's too late, the drone has acquired his biometrics. Its weapons system comes online and spools up, ready to blow him away even as he turns to run. He only gets a few steps when all of a sudden, he hears a strained buzzing sound. Looking back, he sees the drone powering down and crashing haphazardly into the wall of the sewer tunnel. Samar's stomach drops as he realizes what's happened. The EMP grenade has detonated and fried the drones in the area. Frantically he pulls the antidote device from his pocket. Looking at it he has no idea if he cleared the blast radius. Despair starts to settle somewhere deep inside him as he considers that he might have just failed in his mission. The mission entrusted to him by his best friend and mentor.

"Bertie...oh god, I'm so sorry...." he says out loud, stumbling into the wall and sliding down to a sitting position. Tears begin to well up in his eyes, but through the watery blur, his eyes pick up a faint glow in the darkness. Hope stirs in his chest as he realizes what it is. Bertie's digital watch! It's still working, which means he must have been outside the EMP range when it went off! Relief cascades through his body as he painfully climbs back onto his feet. There's still a chance for him to make it all worth it. Looking back at the downed drone, he realizes that his mission just became infinitely more difficult. His scan would have been immediately uploaded to the central file banks, which means that any drone that picks him up from now on will identify him as a rebel. Unable to return safely home to his mother, or even to the surface, unsure of what to do or where to turn, with both the military and a psychotic murderous woman looking for him and all his protectors gone, Samar begins to limp off towards the one friend he knows he has left.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Danny Finn

Danny's eyes flutter open blearily as he fumbles his way back to painful consciousness from comfortable darkness. His head rings and complains with every pulse of blood his heart pushes into it. As he gradually becomes more aware, the first thing he notices is that he is secured tightly to a chair. Bands of duct tape bind his wrists to the armrests, and his torso is taped firmly to the plastic back. Flexing his legs, he feels his calves are each held fast to the chair legs. After several strong blinks, his vision finally starts to come into focus and he recognizes that he's in Manny's office, facing the large wooden desk. He lifts his pounding head to take in more of the room, and a distressed voice breaks the silence in a hushed whisper.

"Danny? Danny! You okay bud?"

Danny turns his head to discover that Harold is bound to a chair directly to his left. The sight of someone he cares about snaps his attention into gear and with a sharp intake of breath he forces his sluggish brain to start working properly.

"Harry?"

"Christ, I was so worried when they dragged you in here all limp. I wasn't sure you were coming back to us," Harold continues, his voice rising slightly from a whisper to a low murmur.

"Us?" Danny questions.

"Yeah bud, look who got dragged out of the grave," he responds, indicating across the room with his nose. Danny turns his head to the right, causing his vision to swim slightly while he takes in the figure taped to a chair on the other side of him. If he hadn't been one hundred percent sure in the alleyway, this second look makes him absolutely certain of the figure's identity.

"Albert..."

"Hey Danny, long time no see. Wish it was under better circumstances," Albert offered with a wince.

"I can't believe ...where the hell have you been?"

"Hiding. Trying to avoid this....Harold filled me in while you were out - I want to thank you for taking care of April and Clint all these years. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like I'll ever get the chance to repay you," he wheezes. Danny can see that he's in rough shape. He's been beaten three ways from Sunday and blood is pouring from his mouth and nose.

"How long have I been out?" Danny asks, the memory of the timed attack from the rebels sparking the tiniest hope within him.

"Not long buddy, but they'll be back any minute," says Harold, craning his neck around to try and see the elevator doors.

As if on cue, the three of them hear the ding of the elevator's arrival. Danny can't turn far enough to see the figures as they emerge from the doors. Manny struts around to his chair, clucking his tongue in disapproval. He is flanked by Denzil and Brad Jones - the general that the rebels had captured. The one Denzil was *meant* to be interrogating. And now here he is, with a smirk of superiority plastered all over his face, despite the arm sling that Danny must have put him in last night.

Denzil is sporting a fancy new military-grade implant. The newer military models don't bother with seamless integration of appearance; they have too many features to look too subtle. Night vision, infrared, target tracking - who knows what else they enable today's soldiers to access. In return, Danny can see that the cybernetic enhancement includes a strip of metal that runs from the power source and computational port encircling his right ear, all the way across his temple to where it fuses with the orbital bone of his right eye. That kind of surgery had to be painful, and Danny can tell that Denzil is far less jovial than usual. With a grim, impatient look, he takes up a post behind and to the side of Manny, with Brad assuming the position opposite him.

Manny plops himself down in his enormous office chair, grabs the bottle of liquor atop the desk and slowly pours himself a glass while shaking his head at the three men in front of him. Sighing heavily, he props his feet up and leans back, swirling the contents of his glass while levelling his gaze at Danny.

"I'm disappointed in you Dandy....did you really think you could pull one over on me? Al here was always a stick in the mud, so his involvement in all this makes a bit more sense. But you, I gave you *everything*, and in return you try to feed me to the wolves? Well, time to pay the piper asshole."

He takes a sip of amber liquid and smacks his lips obnoxiously. Danny checks a clock on the wall above Manny's head and decides to try and buy some time for the rebels to hopefully show up. He doesn't bother to hide the contempt on his face anymore and stares right back at the CEO. "Fuck you, Manny. Your father would be ashamed of you," he spits at his erstwhile boss.

Manny's reaction is immediate. Unaccustomed to being spoken to like this his face turns beet red and he begins to splutter, slamming his glass down onto the desktop as he leans forward while his feet find the floor. "Fuck me? Fuck ME!? Have you forgotten who I AM?! I own the *guns*, you fuck, and when you own the guns, you own EVERYTHING! You don't know shit about my father, and you never will! Know why? Because he's *dead*, just like *you*." He punctuates the finality of his last words by tossing his head back to down the last of his drink. A loud pop reverberates around the room as a bullet enters the back of Manny's head and blows out through his face, shattering the glass in front of it. Danny and the others are showered with blood and brain matter, and Manny slumps over his desk to reveal Denzil standing behind him, smoke drifting up from the muzzle of his pistol.

"Fuck's sake, did he ever shut up? How did you take that all these years, Danny Boy? I couldn't handle him for a morning. Entitled prick." He places a boot against the body sprawled on the desk and shoves it to the ground. Brad steps over it as he comes around to the front of the desk, cracking his knuckles.

"Now, I hope Denzil here has made it abundantly clear that we are not fucking around. So, let's have it. Where's the device?"

A moment of relief washes through Danny as he realizes that they don't yet have what they are looking for. If he can draw out this interrogation just a little longer, Terry might get here in time. He decides to start out playing dumb. "I don't know what you're talking about."

With blinding speed, Brad strikes Danny across the face with a tooth rattling punch using his off hand. He leans in close enough for Danny to smell the coffee on his breath. "Where's those fancy moves now, hmm?" To emphasize his point, he backhands Danny, who nearly tips over in his chair from the force.

As the ringing in Danny's ears subsides, the tiniest of movements catches his eye. Albert's left hand is moving ever so slightly back and forth, and Danny realizes that a shard of Manny's shattered glass must have landed on him. Glass he is now surreptitiously using to saw through the tape binding his arm down. Knowing he needs to keep the attention on himself if Albert is to have a chance to finish his work, he spits out a mouthful of blood and addresses Brad.

"Why don't you let me loose and I'll give you another demonstration? Or are you as much of a coward as you seemed last night?"

The jab has the desired effect, and Brad lunges forward, grabbing Danny by the throat and squeezing tight enough to shut off his air supply. With no way to defend himself, Danny helplessly struggles against his bindings.

Harold furiously strains against his own, snarling at Brad, "Hey! Let him go you fucker! We don't know anything!"

Brad just sneers and stares Harold down while pushing into Danny's throat, but just as his lungs begin to burn from the desire for oxygen, Denzil steps forward and places a hand on Brad's shoulder, causing him to reluctantly release his vice-like grip.

Danny looks up at the rebel lieutenant, betrayal blazing in his eyes. "How could you, Denzil? I thought you hated defectors?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong Danny Boy, I do. It's just that my loyalty doesn't lie where you think it does. I've been working for the government all along. I'm the one who turned Brad here all those years ago, I'm the one who ratted out Albert - both times in fact. Thanks for letting me know he was still around. I'm the one who always found the 'mole' - it's easier than you'd think. Under my blade people have a tendency to follow directions, tell all sorts of stories," he says flatly, unsheathing the wicked knife on his belt and tapping the flat of it on Danny's cheek. "And now, I'm going to be the one to

bring in the antidote device." He starts to cut ever so slowly into Danny's face when Albert's voice rings out.

"Stop! He doesn't know where it is."

Denzil straightens up and glances over to Albert. "Well now, that's the first thing you've said all day that I believe, Bertie."

"Let them go, and I'll tell you where it is."

"Hm. Not as believable, Bertie. Unfortunately, Brad and I are on a bit of a schedule here. Things to do, rebels to kill. So let's be a good lad and give us the device. Now." Denzil nods to Brad, who throws his fist into Albert's face. His head snaps back, but when he brings it back down, he's smiling. He spits blood into Brad's face and snorts derisively.

"I'll die before I tell you anything."

Denzil appraises Albert for a moment before responding with a sigh. "I figured you might. But I wonder, are you willing to be so cavalier with the lives of your friends?"

He takes a step and places his blade against Harold's throat. Danny frantically checks the clock - the rebels will be arriving any minute; he just needs a little longer.

"Denzil! Leave him out of this!!" he roars, but Harold meets his eyes with a resolute look.

"You're a good friend, Danny," he whispers, then looks to Albert and gives a serious nod.

Denzil takes this in impassively and lets out a short, sharp nasal breath.

"No?" he asks, and Albert remains resolutely silent. "Too bad."

With almost no effort at all Denzil draws his knife across Harold's throat, whose eyes go wide as his lifeblood spills down his front.

"No!!!!" Danny screams, "You son of a bitch! I'm gonna kill you!!" Danny thrashes against the tape holding him down, but only manages to loosen one of his leg bindings.

"That's cute Danny Boy, really. What do you think is gonna happen? Terry's gonna ride in like a white knight atop a shining steed? Wake up! Shall we take a little looksee at your precious rebels?" Denzil sneers, and slides behind the desk. He bends down and Danny hears a short grunt of effort. When he comes back up, he has one of Manny's fingers. He tosses it to Brad, who uses it to activate the desk's holographic interface.

While Brad busies himself with computer commands, cycling through different camera feeds, Denzil comes back around and waggles his bloody knife in Danny's face. "You think we're not ready for them? You don't get it yet, do you? Your little rebellion ends today."

"Denzil? All the cameras are down, they're here," Brad growls.

"Just in time! Cycle into one of the drones," Denzil hisses back and grabs Danny by the hair on the back of his head, pulling him forward onto the balls of his feet. As he does, Danny feels something hard inside his boot. The feed above the desk flits to a

POV shot from one of the drones in the warehouse, where Danny can see Terry and the rebel troops filing through the door he set to open. They don't know yet that they are walking into a trap, but it won't be long before they find out.

Danny wrenches his head out of Denzil's grip, losing a tuft of hair in the process, and crashes back down onto all four chair legs. He looks away from what is surely about to become a grizzly scene and Denzil chuckles. "Don't feel like watching? I've been looking forward to this for years," he says, fixating on the poor souls still unaware of the secret slaughter about to be unleashed upon them.

Danny uses this opportunity to frantically catch Albert's eye. He motions subtly down to his boot, which he has nearly wriggled off of his foot. Carefully, he mouths three letters to Albert to let him know what he found inside, "EMP". Albert reveals that he has finally sawed through the tape on his left wrist, though he has severely bloodied his hand in the process. With no time to lose, Danny simply offers a silent prayer as he launches his entire body, chair and all, through the air to crash into Denzil, while he desperately kicks his boot toward Albert.

The boot flies through the air as Danny crushes Denzil against the desk, and Albert's arm pulls free of the duct tape to snatch it. His hand is slick with blood, and he fumbles slightly as he plunges in to grab the grenade hidden within. Brad unholsters his gun and for a terrifying moment it all seems to be going wrong, before Albert makes a sharp motion and Danny's vision goes white with a searing pain as his implant shorts out.

The surprised cries from the two soldiers lets Danny know that their implants have been affected as well, but as a Cyke, Albert seizes this momentary advantage to free himself completely from his chair. Danny's vision starts to clear just in time to see Albert lunge forward to grab him, but a shot rings out and his body jerks to the side with the impact, crashing heavily to the floor. The writhing and cursing lets Danny know that he's not dead yet. Brad stumbles to standing from behind the desk, holding the just-fired pistol shakily in front of him and wincing in pain.

A furious Denzil recovers quickly and hauls Danny upright just to punch him so hard across the face that he goes tumbling back to the ground, the chair cracking but not breaking underneath him. The room swims wildly as his brain reels from the shock of the hit. He feels Denzil scrambling to grab him again when Brad's voice stops him, "Denzil! We've got a problem!"

He's behind the desk once again, wildly trying to get control of the system as it reboots. "Fucking hell!" yells Denzil as he sees what Brad is referring to. If Manny had been anything, it was power hungry, so his console seemingly acts as a master control unit. When it shorted out from the EMP blast, all the drones had lost their commands, and are now harmlessly sitting mid-air while rebel forces take them down. The virtual controls on the desk no longer appear to be functioning.

Denzil sprints to the elevator as he shouts to Brad, "I'll take care of this, you find that fucking device!"

Once the doors slide shut, Brad walks slowly toward Danny. "I'm gonna enjoy this," he says, "I hope you two resist - more fun for me." He kicks Danny violently in the solar plexus, driving the breath out of him. Then he turns his attention to Albert, who is clutching the bullet wound in his shoulder and trying to rise to his knees. Brad seizes Albert and drives his thumb into the gunshot wound, causing Albert to howl in pain. "Tell me where it is!" he screams, and then slams his knee into Albert's jaw.

Danny struggles fiercely on the ground to free himself from the chair he is bound to, throwing his weight around in a way that makes him look like a fish out of water. He feels about that useful. Bellowing in rage he shifts his weight slowly around to see Brad going to work on an increasingly limp and bloody Albert. The amount of damage that Brad is able to do with just one arm is frightening and Danny lets fly every obscenity he can think of in an attempt to distract him even for a moment.

Brad shoots a frenzied look toward Danny, "Don't you worry, I'm coming for you next ya piece of s-"

His words are cut short as a shot rings out and tears a hole through Brad's neck, followed by three more quick shots to centre mass. Stunned, Danny cranes his neck around to see a frightened Neil cowering behind the strong, still form of Shelley Crimson, kneeling in a tactical shooting pose.

"Shelley?" Danny says incredulously.

"Danny, thank god I got here in time," she says, rushing forward to check on Albert.

"You're a pretty good shot for a receptionist," Danny tries to joke, choking lightly on blood as he chuckles.

"And you're a pretty big mess for a warehouse manager. That's a rebellion for you. Terry told me I'd probably find you up here," she replies, and then calls back, "Neil, get your cute butt over there and free Danny!"

"Boy am I glad to know you're on our side. I had no idea! How long?" Danny asks, while Neil goes to work on his bindings.

"About six years now, I think. You?"

"Since we lost Albert there the first time."

Shelley looks down at the bruised and bloody figure on the floor. "Wait, Albert...Shanaghan? Jesus wept, it is you, isn't it?"

"Hey Shell, nice to see you," Albert groans as she wipes more blood from his face.

"How many agents did Terry have here?" Shelley wonders aloud.

"A question I've been asking myself for years. Neil, you on board as well?" Danny asks. When Neil responds with a confused look, Shelley takes over.

"Not him, but he was with me in the lobby when everything broke bad. He seems a bit overwhelmed, I couldn't just leave him there," she explains, tucking an auburn strand behind one ear as she looks over to the body slumped in one of the chairs. "Harold?"

Danny shakes his head sadly.

"Sorry Danny," Shelley offers, "I know you were friends. He was a good guy."

"Yeah, he was. Now let's get out of here, or soon someone will be referring to *us* in the past tense."

Before long the three of them are on their feet, though Albert has most of his weight supported between Neil and Danny. As they ride the elevator back down, Danny hurriedly patches his implant through to Emily.

"Danny? Is that you? Where are you?" Emily fires off as soon as the connection is made.

"Hey babe, listen, I need you to do something for me," Danny begins, but is quickly cut off by his wife.

"Oh no you don't. Don't you dare. You get yourself here right now, mister, we've waited long enough already -"

"Em! Listen to me. I don't have much time. The plan's gone to shit and I need you to leave. Now. You can't wait for me, I've gotta find another way out."

"What do you mean? No, we're not leaving without you!"

"Yes, you are! Don't argue with me on this Em, please. I need to know you're safe. Get out of the city, now. I'll catch up, I promise." It's an empty promise, he knows, but he needs to be sure that his family is safe.

"Goddamn you Danny Finn, don't you go playing hero, you hear me? We'll get out of the city, but we're waiting at the edge of broadcast range until we know you're out. You find an exit and you take it, okay?"

"Yes ma'am. Em....I love you."

"I love you too," she responds quietly.

"Give my love to Robbie."

"I will." Silence hangs for a moment, both of them unwilling to let go just yet. Then Emily speaks one more time, "Stay safe, come back to me."

The connection is severed, and Danny takes a shaky breath before drawing an air of combat readiness about him. The group emerges into the empty lobby with Shelley taking point out front. The goal is to make their way to the parking garage, which still appears to be their best exit. They sweep from room to room and Shelley drops five patrolling soldiers in quick succession as they move. Danny, armed with Brad's gun, plays cleanup for the ones not instantly killed. Eventually they find themselves riding down the lift to the parking garage.

"Let's stay sharp, we don't know what we'll be facing when these doors open, but it's our best shot out of the building," Shelley warns, and Danny hoists Albert's full weight onto Neil, stowing them in the corner so that he and Shelley can both cover the door. The ding signifying the arrival on the appropriate floor is maddeningly cheerful in light of the situation, but Danny dismisses his annoyance and focuses as the doors slide open.

Immediately they find themselves in the middle of a firefight. Rebel soldiers are haphazardly engaging the military in a chaotic scene, and dead combatants from both sides litter the ground. Nearby, a drone's limbs twitch and seize as its chassis burns with raging flames that light the grim scene. With a shout, a troop of military soldiers storm forward, overrunning the last few rebels. Shelley and Danny fire round after round from the cover of the elevator until the last possible moment, and then burst out to finish the job. Danny empties his magazine, and between the two of them they take out the troop. As the last man in front of them hits the ground, they hear a battle cry from off to the side and see a lone soldier making a brave last charge toward them holding a knife. With Danny's magazine spent, Shelley raises her pistol and takes careful aim. Just as she squeezes the trigger there is a cry of despair from behind, and the bloody figure of Albert crashes into her, causing her shot to go wide. In a moment the soldier is upon them, and Danny sidesteps the initial swipe of his knife before kicking just above the elbow to disarm him. The soldier screams with rage, and throws himself at Danny, limbs thrashing wildly; the soldier is Spiked. It helps Danny to easily lure the snarling soldier into a position where he can be restrained.

The strength of the Spiked soldier, however, is more than Danny planned for, and he struggles to hold on him down.

"Al, come over here," Danny demands, unable to loosen his grip without losing control. Albert limps over and kneels beside them, after a moments pause he tenderly takes hold of the soldier's face.

As the soldier looks at him, he begins to calm, and his eyes lose the wild edge they had held.

The soldier stops struggling and peers into Albert's face, vague recognition fighting confusion on his face. "D....Dad?" he whispers.

This time when the boy pulls, Danny releases his grip, because he can see that it's true - the soldier is Clint Shanaghan.

Tears well up in several pairs of eyes as the estranged father and son gaze at each other in shock. Clint gingerly reaches out a hand to touch his father, testing the reality of this impossibility. As he makes contact, the fight leaves him completely. "Dad!" he cries out as he chokes back a sob. Forgetting all their injuries the two embrace in a fierce hug.

"Clint, my god, look at you! You got so big!" Albert declares, holding Clint briefly at arms length before pulling him tightly back into the hug.

"Dad...I...how? I don't understand..." Clint stutters.

"Shhh, it's okay, I'm here now," Albert responds, stroking his son's hair, "There's time to explain everything later."

When the shot rings out, it takes everyone by surprise. Because of the echo in the cavernous garage, it's not even immediately clear where it came from, but the way that Albert's body jerks and the gasp he lets out makes it very clear where it went. Clint grips

his father, and his face contorts into disbelief and shock as Albert's full weight drags them to the ground.

The second shot tears through Shelley's left leg, and Danny shoves Neil behind a nearby car as a third bullet grazes his own arm. Now it's all too obvious where the shots are coming from, as Denzil storms forward, peppering the area with bullets until his automatic rifle clicks empty. He releases the spent magazine and smoothly spins behind a pillar to reload, while Shelley futilely fires a few bullets in his direction.

"I'm gettin' real sick of you interfering with my plans, Danny Boy!" Denzil calls from a distance.

Trying to get a grip on the situation, Danny calls over to Shelley in a forceful whisper, "You okay?"

"Can't walk, nearly out of ammo," she responds, wincing and applying pressure to her leg as her pants soak through with blood.

"Stay here, cover me, I'll circle around."

Danny knows he has to move fast, but his options are limited. Next to him, Clint seems frozen in shock staring at Albert, who moments ago was returned to him miraculously, and now lies motionless in his arms. Neil is curled into a ball behind the car where Danny shoved him, and Shelley is bleeding out fast. He's out of ammo, and out of time, so he nods to Shelley and launches himself across the open space in front of him as she fires a single round to keep Denzil in place. Tumbling into the line of cars opposite the elevator, he crouches low, hoping he hasn't been spotted, and starts to crawl.

"*Oh Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are ca-a-lling,*" Denzil sings in a mocking tone from behind cover. He tries to spin out to fire, but a quick shot from Shelley keeps him pinned for the time being. "How many bullets do you have left, huh mate? 'Cause I guaran-fucking-tee you I've got more."

"Fuck you!" Shelley yells, and Denzil bursts out laughing.

"Touched a nerve, have I? Don't be raw about Shanaghan, he's a terrorist! Got what's coming to 'im!" he yells back. Danny has crawled half the distance toward Denzil. Looking back across the way, Clint still seems frozen, and Shelley is starting to look even paler than usual. He needs to move more quickly.

"Don't believe me? Who do you think blew up those buildings the day he went missing?" Swinging out from the other side of the pillar Denzil fires off two quick shots before Shelley sends him back to cover with a few more rounds. "All those people he sacrificed just to hide his own cowardly escape and look where it got him!" As he yells these final words he spins out from his hiding spot and is about to fire when Shelley squeezes her trigger first. The bullet ricochets off of the sight of Denzil's rifle, causing him to drop the weapon in surprise. Shelley's out of bullets. Denzil grins wolfishly and begins to walk forward, unholstering his sidearm. "Nearly, young lady. But not near enough."

He pauses in his stride to line up a shot, Danny leaps forward, springing off of the side of one car to plant a foot on the hood of another, which he uses to launch himself into a headlong tackle. The figure flying out from the shadows catches Denzil by surprise and Danny's full weight barrels into him. The two tumble to the ground and the gun goes flying from Denzil's grasp, skittering away on the polished concrete. Scrambling to their feet, the two men square off.

"There he is, Danny Boy to the rescue," Denzil sneers, "Come on then."

Danny closes distance and throws three lightning-fast punches, mildly surprised that none of them connect as Denzil dances backward before catching Danny's outstretched arm and wrenching it around to put on a lock. When Danny feels the twist of the lock coming on he flips forward, landing back on his feet and immediately shifting to deliver a side kick that sends Denzil stumbling away.

"HoHO! He's a fancy lad, is he?" Denzil mocks, and then launches toward him again with a barrage of tight punches that Danny barely has time to block as he is driven backward. Denzil shuffles his feet forward and flings a snap kick toward Danny's face, which he avoids by slipping to the side and delivering a heavy kick of his own to Denzil's raised leg, turning him sideways. Pressing the advantage, he rams a knuckle down where Denzil's kidney should be but only succeeds in pushing Denzil a step away. *The bastard's wearing body armour*, Danny realizes too late, as he takes a backward mule kick to the solar plexus. Without pause, Denzil rotates athletically to deliver a devastating spinning kick that catches the side of Danny's head. He slams onto the hood of a nearby car and narrowly rolls out of the way as Denzil's heel comes smashing down from above, denting the metal where his face had been just a millisecond ago. Dashing around the car, Danny begs his vision to steady itself as he recovers, and the two of them play cat and mouse for a few seconds.

Denzil rushes in after him. Danny waits until the last instant before kicking off of the wall and vaulting over the corner of the car to land behind Denzil, wrapping one arm around his opponent's neck and locking it in with the other. Tucking his chin tightly, Denzil prevents the choke from taking full effect and drops his weight. The bullet graze from earlier makes Danny's arm slick with blood, and he grits his teeth with effort as Denzil starts to slip out of the hold. When he attempts to readjust, Denzil swiftly reverses direction and smacks his head up into Danny's jaw, causing him to release. In a flash Denzil twists around and the two begin to trade blows furiously. Their skill appears evenly matched as they block and strike, only letting the occasional punch or kick slip through their defences. While Denzil's body armour continues to protect him, Danny feels the full brunt of each punishing blow. He digs deep for the strength to keep going, and the two drive each other back and forth across the garage until an exhausted Danny finally sees an opening. Feinting a kick with his left to draw Denzil in, he deftly shifts his weight and chambers a strong roundhouse kick with his right. Denzil is launched fully into the air, slamming into the back of a van and crumpling like a rag doll.

Danny rushes forward to close the distance between them and finish the fight, but Denzil scrambles to the side and reaches his arm underneath a nearby car. When he brings it back it's firmly gripping his lost pistol, and Danny frantically rolls sideways as Denzil fires off a few wild rounds. Sprinting for better cover, Danny ducks and weaves around cars to avoid the bullets now glancing off surfaces all around him while Denzil gives chase. He disappears from view behind a large truck and instantly changes direction to throw off his pursuer. Denzil, too intent on his prey, doesn't see it coming when Danny suddenly erupts from the other side of the truck, slamming into him and reaching over to grapple his gun arm. Danny struggles wildly against Denzil as the gun inches slowly toward his head for the kill shot. He's stronger, but Denzil has the advantage and Danny just barely shifts out of the way as the gun fires, grazing the side of his head and clipping his ear. Deafened from the blast, Danny's eyes go wide with panic, when suddenly he sees salvation quickly approaching, he hurls himself towards Denzil - into the path of the large silver SUV speeding down the parkway. There is a sickening crunch and the squealing echo of tires braking. Denzil's body is thrown twenty feet, bouncing several times across the concrete before skidding to a bloody stop.

Danny collapses in relief, panting hard as the ringing in his ear starts to dissipate. Looking up, he notices with surprise that Neil is in the driver's seat of the SUV, holding the wheel in a white-knuckled grip and staring wide-eyed at the body lying ahead, Neil looks shaken.

"I shouldn't...shouldn't have d...done that..." he murmurs. Danny gently peels Neil's fingers from the wheel and reassures him.

"You just saved my life buddy, so thank you."

"No, no, no..." Neil moans, "I...I didn't mean to get involved..."

"Yeah, but not a moment too soon," Danny says, helping a pale Neil out of the seat. "Time for us to get out of here man, help me grab Shelley and Clint."

Pulling Neil along through his state of shock, Danny starts hobbling toward Shelley, feeling like he was the one hit by a car. Annoyed by Neil lagging behind he turns to encourage him and freezes, his face turning as pale as Neil and Shelley's own complexions. Just behind them, Denzil is slowly rising up, his face a bloody mask of rage. His handgun levels at Danny, who's mind flits to the thought of Emily, waiting in vain for him to join her. *I'm sorry Em, I tried*, he thinks and closes his eyes in resignation as the sound of a weapon firing reverberates throughout the space. Followed by another, and another, and suddenly Danny opens his eyes to see Clint charging forward with a recovered firearm. His eyes are wild with hate and Denzil's body dances like a puppet on strings as round after round peppers him. Clint's eyes flash furiously, and he emits a guttural, primal scream, firing over and over until the gun clicks empty. Not satisfied, he springs atop the falling Denzil and begins to batter him with the butt of his gun. Stunned by the violence of it, it takes Danny a moment before he rushes over to pull Clint off, who by now has mashed Denzil's face into an unrecognizable slurry of

blood and bone. It takes all of Danny's remaining strength to pull the young man off as he lashes out, kicking and screaming until his own energy is consumed. Then he slumps onto Danny's shoulder and begins to weep uncontrollably.

"He killed him...he was there, he was *right there*... his sobs crescendo back into a violent wail as he tries to fling himself back at the corpse of Denzil, but Danny's grip holds him tightly against his spent strength. Danny does his best to console the destroyed boy, hugging him with all his fatherly might, and then leading him back to the SUV. He straps him into one of the rear seats before returning to Neil, who is kneeling next to Shelley. Her face looks decidedly less pale than Danny remembers, and he relaxes slightly, seeing Neil wrapping her leg wound tightly with a strip of cloth. She reaches up tenderly and holds Neil's face. He looks entirely unsure of what to do.

"Shell, are you ok? That leg looked pretty bad," Danny enquires.

"I guess it looked worse than it is. Nurse Neil here seems to have patched me up pretty good," she uses Neil to help herself stand "but I'm still pretty weak. You guys should scram. Your job is done here. Mine isn't."

"Shelley, you should come with us, I can't just leave you here," Danny protests.

"You can and you will. Now vamoose before you lose your window," she insists, picking up an automatic rifle from one of the bodies and slamming a new magazine in.

The resolute, commanding look on her face seems so foreign from the cheerful receptionist he has come to know, and he realizes that in reality he must know very little about her.

How the hell did a woman like that take shit from Manny all those years, he wonders. The man is lucky she didn't take his head off a thousand times over.

Danny reluctantly stops arguing - grabs the steering wheel - and pulls the SUV out of the garage and toward April, Robbie, Emily, and a new life

INTERLUDE

Compassion, dark side of the moon

Within the confines of the cloaked scouting ship, floating in the blackness of space, the Zincod watchers are keenly aware of what it is they do not feel. Ripples of worry and doubt spread through their consciousnesses as they reach for, yet do not find, HZ's empathic link with the ship. He has been on the surface of the planet far longer than was intended. He should have been back by now. And now he's gone.

Events are in motion that have thrown the quantum frequency in this quadrant into disarray. The potential outcomes are murky and distant, and very few of the glimpses that show themselves are lined with hope. HZ is the one that led them down this path, and the loss of his leadership in this moment is deeply concerning. Questions litter the collective consciousness that the group currently occupies.

*Where is HZ?
he still be trusted?
Why can we no longer feel his presence?
Has he lost sight of the mission?
Has he already gone too far?
Has he abdicated the role of watcher in favour of influencing events?
If he has,
would that be so wrong?
Is he wrong to place faith in humanity? Can humanity be saved?
If we were to help, as HZ wants, would we be violating our oath to maintain quantum harmony?
Would we be upholding it?
Has HZ abandoned us for the humans?
Have we abandoned HZ by ignoring his pleas to help?
Would our aid help or hinder the humans in their growth?
Are we running out of time to make a decision?
If we continue to wait, will it be too late?
What point is the threshold of no return one way or the other?
What do we do?*

In Zincod physiology, one gains size through the accumulation of experience; a mark of the capacity for wisdom that has been gained. Now, the largest of the present

Zincods projects her consciousness forward to assume command. Without HZ present to add his observations, a decision must nonetheless be made. She draws the rest of the Zincods into a state of contemplation about what they already know.

Humans are volatile, but HZ believes that they can become stable members of the galactic harmonic frequency. To do so will require a massive leap forward in human consciousness. There are those upon this beautiful planet, teeming with life, that work to protect and enhance it. There are those that work towards its destruction, knowingly or not. Compared to the Zincod perception of the universe, humans can barely be considered conscious at all. Much as a human might think of a mouse or a dog as a lesser consciousness, so too are humans a smaller fractal embodiment of the larger consciousness that a Zincod might consider to be fully functional.

One of the Zincods offers that there is precedent within humanity for such leaps of conscious evolution. From curious apes to tribal hominids, to the emergence from the Dark Ages, humans have shown a remarkable ability to open their minds to encompass larger conceptions.

A less certain Zincod interjects that the coming evolutionary jump, if it were to occur, is not just a change in thinking, or cognitive ability, but one that will require an opening of the empathic body to the desired quantum frequency. Such a leap is an enormous chasm to bridge.

Compassion then, the largest Zincod determines, is the key. The quantum frequency that Earth currently embodies is discordant, yes, but a rise in compassion is the path to tuning that frequency. Just as the Zincods would wish for compassion to be shown to them, so too must they bring compassion to the struggling humans. They must find the proper course to bolster this compassion on Earth.

There are those that HZ has earmarked as large players in the current quantum flux - those that will have the potential to create the largest effect on what is to come. The Boy, the Warrior, the Leader, the Visionary.... Are any of them ready? And if so...which one?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Supetar, Croatia, The Free World (6 years after launch)

Noah Levi

"Noah, I just don't agree. Things are progressing at the pace that we can handle, why the sudden push?" Vanessa asks. Looking around the table, Noah is somewhat disappointed to see several heads nodding along with Vanessa's rebuttal. He'd expected more members of his inner circle to be on the same page as him, but as the discussion has progressed, he's become aware that he is quickly losing ground. If he had guessed that there would be this level of disagreement, he might have waited a few more weeks before bringing up the topic of expanding recruitment efforts, but now that he's let his position be known, he decides he needs to defend it.

"I think we're capable of more. Much more. We didn't start this project just to rest on our laurels. Things are going well! Between the sale of Simon's new non-military drone models, and how well our agricultural exports are doing, our coffers for dealing with The Profits are full to overflowing. Now is the time to expand aggressively."

Noah's appeal doesn't have the rousing effect that he was hoping for. His eyes flit around the table at each of his most trusted advisors. They've been meeting at the central public modular - affectionately called The Pub for short - every week since it's construction, to discuss the important matters over a nice cold pint or a glass of wine. The only difference today is the level of dissent among the group. He's certain Adriana has his back - she knows the accounts better than anyone and sees the potential they have now to act. But the rest of the group seems divided. Simon Craig hasn't given much of an indication one way or the other, and Noah knows that he's a real numbers guy. He likes to have all the information before he makes a decision. He expected that as usual, Ethan would be the cynical voice of the bunch, but to his surprise Noah has found an ally in him today. Perhaps living free has finally started to soften the man's temperament. Andy Jones is currently siding with Vanessa in the opinion that the level of recruitment should remain at its current pace. It's a little annoying not to have the support of the resident sustainable systems expert but given time Noah thinks he can bring him around, so instead he sets his sights on one of his oldest friends.

From his peaceful, spiritual nature you might not guess that Thomas Lincoln had once been a special forces operative and one of the most sought after security experts in the world, but Noah knows that the security of The Free World couldn't be in better hands. "Thom, what do you think? We've got the resources, we've got proof of concept - it's time to fulfill our promise of entry to The Free World for everyone who wants to join."

Thomas shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "I don't know Noah. Things are on a controllable scale right now. I'm not convinced we have the systems in place to handle such a large influx. I mean, look at us, the people in charge of a new type of society,

and we're making important decisions in The Pub, over a drink. I mean no offense, but doesn't it feel a little...amateur?"

"That's what I'm saying!" chirps Vanessa's holographic projection, "Things are working right now precisely *because* of how small we've remained. If we throw the doors wide we'll lose control over our founding principles."

Noah's eyes narrow slightly at that. "Do you mean the founding principles of allowing people to lead lives of their own choosing, free of oppressive structures?"

"You know what I mean, Noah," Vanessa sighs. "I want that as much as anyone here, but we're still laying a foundation. If we're to succeed, we need to have the right kind of people here to establish a society founded on ethical principles. I understand that you're frustrated with how slowly vetting is going, but that's not just because of our end. Those who come have to choose to do so of their own volition, right? Well, they don't always make that choice, and even if they do, it's not always easy for them to follow through."

"Okay, okay," Noah says, raising his hands in defence, "I hear what you're saying, and I'm not going to force the issue if we're not in agreement. But I still think we need to be considering stepping up our timeline."

For the first time all evening, Simon leans forward, drawing the group's attention. "There are merits to both arguments, to be certain. Security and ethical considerations are both high in the algorithm's criteria for searching out candidates, but I don't think we can continue to ignore the possibility of competition for too much longer."

"Competition?" inquires Adriana.

"Did you think we were alone in trying to establish a new way of life? I'm not aware of anyone who quite has our level of resources - point for Noah. But I've identified a number of groups that are striking out like we did, and not all of them are entirely peaceful - point for Ethan. As quiet as we're trying to be, we've already begun to catch the attention of economic powers, who might not be too thrilled to learn how quickly we're affecting the market. You might consider that an argument against aggressive expansion, but I would counter that once The Profits are fully aware of how we're operating, we'll want to be closer to critical mass for market influence. For that, we need numbers."

"And allies," Vanessa offers. Simon quizzically tilts his head, and so she elaborates. "We've got, what, close to ten operational hubs at the moment? A couple others nearing completion, with plans for at least seven more, but they won't be active for a few years. One of the major points of The Free World is to keep community population low, ensuring prosperous community-minded living. If we open the floodgates, we might overpopulate the hubs faster than we can build new ones. I think we should be doing more outreach. Iceland is already interested in the hub we have there as a pilot project for their nation, and there's a colony in the West Frisian Islands that could be friendly to our way of thinking. We can only hide for so long."

Ethan chews on this for a moment before adding his voice. "Vanessa's right. Our naval fleet is growing, but they're built for economic ventures, not protection. If a country decided to roll in here tomorrow with military force, we wouldn't stand a chance. If we want to change the world, it's not all going to come along without some opposition. We need to be assembling a coalition of allies that will make it less easy to confront us head on. And if I'm being blunt...I wouldn't mind having a few more people around here that can handle a weapon in case push comes to shove."

A few minutes of silence follow Ethan's remarks as everyone considers the implications of what he's saying. Noah drains off the last of his ale and places the glass on the table definitively. "I don't think we're going to come to any final decisions on this right now. Let's think it over and come back to the table in a few days. In the meantime, Simon, have a look at what non-lethal protective measures we might be able to develop. Adriana, can you put together some missives for Iceland and the West Frisians that we can send over to Vanessa? She'll be out of range of our broadcast tower in a few hours, so you can keep it brief, but we might as well start laying some groundwork there. Ethan, you've developed some contacts across in Croatia. Can you feel them out? See if they might be amenable to a closer partnership? With regards to people that can handle weapons, I think you're actually in luck there. Vanessa, I believe you mentioned that the next batch has a few ex-military personnel, is that right?"

"Mmhhh," she replies, "The Finns have activated their beacon, I think you'll like them, Ethan. They've been civilians for a good long while, but Neil, my contact in D.C. promises that they are full of potential and have been keeping up with some martial pursuits. All being well, I'll be rendezvousing with them on this run."

Ethan smiles, "It's a start!"

Conversation slips into friendly banter for the next half hour, and one by one the group begins to disband until only Noah and Adriana remain with the ghostly form of Vanessa, projected more and more shakily from aboard the aircraft carrier. Noah tilts his head affectionately in her direction. "It's hard not to have you here with us in person, Vanessa. I hope you know how much we appreciate the time you're spending abroad. I don't want to seem ungrateful for everything you're doing."

"Don't work yourself up, Noah," she replies, "I'm where I want to be right now, and I know you too well to think you're ungrateful. But if you'd like to show some extra appreciation for my recruitment efforts, the Patels will be there in an hour. Feel like conducting a welcome tour?"

"It would be my absolute pleasure."

Noah drapes an arm around Adriana's shoulders and inhales the crisp, sea-salt breeze coming in off the ocean. They stand at the end of the dock, which is now kitted out with a significant expansion from their original make-shift setup. The boat ferrying

the newcomers over from the airport in Split, Croatia, drifts the final few feet as lines are tossed over to secure them. Before long, the two new figures who have arrived on the boat come up to join the waiting founders, smiling from ear to ear.

They are a middle-aged couple with dark skin and friendly faces. Having briefed herself from Vanessa's files, Adriana offers official introductions. "Noah, let me introduce you to the Patels: Akshat and Trina, from Brantford, England. Akshat is a dentist, and I'm sure Karina will be happy to hear that Trina is an exceptional doctor." The group exchanges pleasantries and Noah begins to lead Vanessa's standard integration tour, with Adriana in tow to make sure that any administrative questions Akshat and Trina have are answered, and that they feel welcomed in their new home.

As they enter the village for the first time, descending a small hill from the north Noah launches eagerly into the tour-guide speech. "As you can see, the first thirty modular homes were built along the banks of this stunning freshwater lake. It's fed from springs up in the mountains there, which also provide our hub with all the water we need. It also keeps the lake refreshingly cool, and you're very likely to see residents splashing around at all hours, or fishing in some of the quieter bays. You'll note that the personal modulares all have a large garden in which to grow food. There aren't many requirements for life here in Supetar, but we do ask that each resident maintains their own garden."

"Gladly!" Akshat pipes in. "I've always enjoyed gardening. Although Trina here is really the one with a green thumb."

"Well, Ryan Addison," Noah continues, "who you'll meet later on tonight, is our resident horticulturist. He helps maintain all of the public gardens you see, as well as the fruit trees lining this path. He's become very adept at teaching newcomers all they need to know about maintaining a proper garden, so I have no doubt your own thumb will be green before too long, Mr. Patel."

It's an absolutely gorgeous day, with a bright blue sky and not a cloud in sight, making it easy for Noah to introduce the Patels to all the current residents that are out eating dinner on their terrace, or working in their gardens. When they reach the bottom of the lane, the village forks off in either direction around the The Pub - a familiar sight that seems to please their British newcomers. It's a much larger building than most of the other modulares, encompassing a large open space that spans both inside and outdoor areas, lined with tables, chairs, and a bar stretching the width of the interior - complete with pumps for beer and shelves of bottled wine and spirits. Akshat peeks in as they pass and joyfully takes in the amenities, including table tennis, snooker, darts, and even a sizeable stage to host entertainment.

Adriana pipes up, "This is where residents tend to socialize together in the evenings. We have an array of entertainment that people enjoy presenting live music, poetry readings, comedy; you name it! We have a couple people who brew various types of alcohol, and even a still in the back of The Pub. But if you ask me, Andy Jones

makes the best ale on the island," she relates, nudging Trina conspiratorially with her elbow. The tour continues down the left fork of the laneway and Noah points out a café, a quaint library, a bakery, and even a modern-looking restaurant where people are dining.

Trina looks around in wonderment and then speaks up with a question, "How can you afford to provide all of this?" Here, Adriana steps forward to explain.

"Inside The Free World, we don't have to *afford* anything. Every resident works together to provide something that they enjoy providing. Zoe Lincoln, our resident chef, loves cooking for people, so she opened a restaurant. She plans out menus in advance and opens time slots at her leisure that residents can book through our central booking system, so that each meal can be made to order. If someone wants to learn to cook, they help her out in the kitchen, and everyone is the better for it. If someone else wants to open a restaurant of their own, a proposal can be brought forward and a modular can be constructed in a few hours for them to work out of. The same is true of all the amenities you see offered in town."

Noah adds, "Now, if you're asking where everything we use *comes* from, jump in here and I'll show you around." He gestures toward a small electric cart, which the Patels eagerly bundle into. Noah takes them out of town and shows them the fields, vineyards, and orchards that have been planted, and they can see the drone work force buzzing about busily, tending to them. Raising his voice above the rushing wind, Noah describes the sights, "Over there you can see larger buildings that house hydroponic farms, the drone factory, and fabrication plants that can essentially print items from raw materials. We produce far more goods than our small village could possibly use, especially with everyone growing their own food. And so, we're able to sell the excess to neighbouring countries who still operate under capitalist or for-profit systems. Since there is no need for anyone to make profit in The Free World, where there is no monetary system at all, all proceeds can be used directly to acquire anything we might need that we can't produce ourselves."

"Simply marvellous!" remarks Trina, with Akshat nodding his astounded agreement.

Swinging back into town, Noah points out the large educational complex that is close to completion, an indoor fitness centre, a cluster of moduls that house what he terms the "Holistic Health Centre" where the Patels will have their own spaces to offer services if they so wish, and finally pulls up next to Adriana, standing by a freshly assembled modular home. "And that concludes my portion of the tour! I'm sure this is a lot to take in, so I will leave you in Adriana's capable hands. She'll show you around your new home and get you acquainted with the central computer system. Take some time, settle in, and if I don't see you later tonight, I hope you'll join me for some yoga in the downtown park tomorrow morning. Best way to start your day, I guarantee it." He

smiles broadly, and the Patels thank him fervently before clambering out to rejoin Adriana, who welcomes them to their personal modular home.

She leans into the cart after they bustle indoors. "Hey there, looks like that went pretty well!" she exclaims.

"They'll have a million more questions, I'm sure, but Vanessa's done it again, they're a wonderful couple," he remarks in return. "I can't wait to see who she brings in next!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

South of Washington D.C.

Emily Finn

The tension in the air is palpable as Emily paces back and forth on the side of the road. April is doing her best to distract Robbie while they wait, but there's only so much that can be done to avoid the subject on everyone's minds. They've been perched on the outer range limit of the D.C. Network broadcast tower for too long. Danny should have made contact by now to let them know he's on his way. Emily hopelessly scans the horizon on the extreme outskirts of the city, each shaky breath bringing her closer to the inevitable conclusion that she is so reluctant to accept - that they'll have to move on. Without confirmation that he got out. That he'll be coming. That he's even still alive.

She shakes her head against that thought. *Danny's alive, I know he is. He'll make it...he has to...* But despite how much she wants to, she's having a hard time convincing herself that it's such a certainty. The sun beating down on the asphalt is causing enough heat distortion to constantly trick her mind into seeing approaching vehicles, but so far they have all turned out to be mirages. She waits a few more desperate minutes before sighing and turning to the vehicle.

"What do you think?" asks April, looking up as Emily trudges back.

"We can't wait much longer," she replies, glancing over to the countdown clock emanating from the invitation to The Free World and chewing on her bottom lip. "We didn't plan for there to be a time limit to get there, but if we go any further then we won't be able to warn Danny about it! We won't even know if he's coming."

"Don't think like that, Em. He's coming. If we go, he might not be able to initiate a call, but we can still leave messages for him. He'll get them as soon as he enters the new broadcast zone. But if we don't go..."

"Yeah, I know. We might not make it in time," Emily finishes for her, sounding more resigned than ever. She takes a long look at Robbie, who is now nodding off in the back seat after a mostly sleepless night. Her shoulders slump and she nods her head, fighting the emotion welling up inside. *April left everyone behind, I can't make that mean nothing by refusing to do the same*, is the thought that lingers in her mind as she swings into the driver's seat, gritting her teeth in determination. "Okay, we'll record a message for Danny, and then we'll get on the road."

April seems to relax when she hears this, and Emily wonders whether she would have argued with her if she had asked to stay any longer. *She probably would have been right to*, she thinks as she brings up the Network menu. The signal from the broadcast tower is weak at this distance and it takes a moment for it to fully connect, but once it does, she gestures reluctantly over to her contacts list. Danny's name pops up at the very top of the list, as it usually does. She steels herself so that she can remain composed while she records the message, and then reaches up to select his name.

Just as her finger is about to press the holographic button, her display suddenly lights up with an incoming call. "April!! It's Danny!" Emily practically screams, nearly dismissing the call in the frantic rush to answer it. April's face lights up, and Robbie jerks awake, dashing forward to lean over the front seats. Steadying herself, Emily connects the call to the army vehicle's internal system. The speakers crackle to life with a spotty, static-filled sound.

"Em-...Emil-...-ou there?" The voice cuts in and out through the shaky connection, but relief floods through Emily's body as she recognizes her husband.

"Danny! Oh thank god! Are you okay? Can you hear us?"

"...-kay! I'm on-...-way, where are y-.."

"Danny, you're cutting in and out. Let me drop you our coordinates!" Emily quickly sends Danny a ping to indicate where they are and then presses the ignition, throwing the vehicle into reverse and tearing back down the way they had come to find better reception.

"Dad!" shouts Robbie.

"Robbi-...-ey buddy! It's good to hear y-...-oice!" The static starts to clear as Emily races back in the direction of the city, strengthening the broadcast signal. "...-peaking of, April, are you there?"

"I'm here Danny! Damn you had us worried for a bit there!"

"Yeah, sorry about that, but to make up for it, I've got someone with me that I think you'll want to hear from." A look of confusion passes over April's face at that, and she leans in to hear what comes next. There's a pause that hangs in the air, and now that the static has cleared, Emily brings them to a stop so everyone can hear better. A familiar voice breaks the silence.

"Mom? Hey, it's, uh, it's me." The colour drains completely from April's stunned face, and she can barely find her voice to respond.

"Clint? Clint, baby, is that you?" she finally squeaks out through clenched vocal cords.

"Yeah, it's me Mom. I, uh, I found Danny, or, I guess he found me. But I'm with him, we're coming."

Concern clouds April's face as she listens. "Clint, are you okay? You sound strange, what's going on?" It's Danny's voice that comes back over the speakers.

"He's good April, I promise, but we encountered some...resistance. We're gonna have to pull over to patch ourselves up pretty soon."

"We've got first aid supplies here," Emily cuts in, "can you make it to us?"

"Don't worry, but based on the coordinates you just send me, no. You're a good couple of hours away from us right now, and we have to stop pretty soon. I'm just trying to get us somewhere safe first. I don't want you coming back inside city limits either, it's too dangerous. I think we might be getting out just in time."

"Shit, Danny, listen. We're on a bit of a tight timeline."

"What do you mean?"

"The invitation - when we activated the beacon, it started a countdown. We've got just under twenty hours to make it to the pickup point. Some airfield in the middle of nowhere. After that...I dunno, it might give us another pickup, or that might be it. But I looked at the maps babe; even if we only take the main roads, it's still at least a fourteen hour drive."

"Fuck. That's a tight window, " Danny replies with a sigh. "Where are we heading?"

Emily had been dreading having to answer that question. "It's pretty far South, Dan. Alabama, near the old border with Florida." A long moment of silence follows this revelation, until Danny's voice crackles in again.

"Listen, you need to go ahead, you can't wait for us."

"Danny, no!"

"Em, listen to me, please. We can catch up, but if we're heading down into unregulated territory, you know we can't stay on the main roads. You need to drive carefully and stay out of sight as much as possible."

"And what about you?"

"We'll be fine! We'll get patched up, get on our way, and be back with you before you know it. Drop us geo-tagged messages every time you enter a new broadcast region, and then all we have to do is follow the breadcrumb trail you leave us until we meet back up, okay?"

Emily isn't okay, but she knows that he's right. If they make it to the pickup first, they can hold them until Danny gets there if he falls behind. But if neither of them make it in time, they might lose their shot and wind up stranded in a no-go zone. "Okay Danny, we'll go. But don't you waste any time, you get on our tail right away, you hear me?"

Danny's weary chuckle is a welcome sound. "Yes ma'am! Try not to worry, babe. We'll be right behind you."

"You'd better be."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Danny Finn

Closing out the connection to his implant, Danny relaxes into the seat of the SUV they acquired. Looking back at the rear seat, he can tell that Clint's condition is steadily declining. Whatever drugs were contained in the formula for the military Spike are wearing off, and between the ensuing crash and his physical and emotional wounds, Clint is looking worse for wear. His skin has gone pale and clammy, and his pupils are dilating in odd and off-putting ways underneath his fluttering eyelids. Glancing at himself in the rear-view mirror, he can see that the wound on the side of his head from where Denzil's bullet grazed him is still bleeding quite heavily which, in addition to the amount of other head trauma he has sustained, is likely why he is having trouble keeping his vision in focus. Trying to ignore his swollen, battered face and the chunk of ear he is now missing, he checks the passenger seat beside him, where Neil still appears to be in a state of shock with his eyes wide and his mouth mumbling incoherently.

Damn, doesn't look like any of us are in a condition to drive right away, he realizes with disappointing finality. He had expected as much, but the reality of his family driving further away by the moment weighs heavily on him. He turns the silver SUV down a side street and pulls into the waiting darkness of an alley where he is relatively certain that they won't be discovered. Using the frame of the car to steady himself as his vision starts to swim, he makes his way back to the side door and unclips Clint from his seatbelt. Gently encouraging the young man, he shifts him sideways, nearly losing his own balance when he miscalculates how much support he needs to give to lay Clint slowly down across the seats. Moving as quickly as his aching body will allow, he hauls himself inside and manoeuvres Clint into the recovery position. While Danny busies himself checking vital signs, Clint stirs and blearily looks around.

"Dad?" His voice is distant and unsupported, coming out in a slurred croak.

"No, sorry Clint, it's Danny."

"Daddy?" he says, his voice pitching up with emotion.

"Danny. Danny Finn. You know me. Do you know where we are buddy?" Danny asks the young man, lifting his eyelids to double check the disturbing state of Clint's eyes. After a moment, they seem to drift more into focus on the figure overtop of him.

"Mr. Finn? Right. Yeah, you found me. Now we're going...somewhere," he says with a faraway look.

"We're going to meet up with your mother, remember? You spoke with her," Danny coaxes.

Recognition seems to float across Clint's face, followed by a wince as he recalls what they just went through. "My Dad. He was there. Wasn't he?"

"Yeah buddy, he was there. I'm so, so sorry."

"That guy, he called him a terrorist. Said he, he blew up those buildings. Is that true?"

"I'm sorry Clint, I don't know," Danny responds, "but even if he did, it doesn't change the fact that your father loved you. So much."

"Then...why...why didn't he ever come back?" Clint asked, curling up as the emotion overwhelms him and racks him with sobs. Seeing the fragile state that the Spike has caused fills Danny with resentment for the authorities who put him in this position.

Emily's right - what kind of life was that? How could I have let this happen?

"Listen to me, okay? Your father was a good man. He gave up everything, including the years he could have had with you and April, for us. So that we could have a better life. He made that sacrifice *because* he loved you, m'kay? If he could have come back, he would have, in a heartbeat. Don't ever doubt that."

Clint's eyes shut tight for a moment, and though he isn't sure, Danny thinks he sees him nod slightly before his frame starts to shudder. The convulsions only last a minute, but Danny stays with him, holding him steady until they fade, and Clint seems to drift off to sleep. Seeing his breathing become steady, Danny decides that he had better see to his own injuries. Turning around awkwardly in the back of the SUV, he leans forward over the unresponsive Neil to check the glove compartment for something to staunch his bleeding head wound. It's well past the point of no return when he realizes the mistake he has made in leaning so far forward. His vision swims and closes in from all sides, and it's all he can do to contort himself into a slightly elevated position before his body gives out underneath him and he slips into the dark abyss of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Emily Finn

"I spy with my little eye, something that is...green," offers Robbie in a drab sing-song the lets Emily know he resents being reduced to playing what he termed a 'little kids game'.

"Green, huh?" responds Emily, intentionally drawing out the process of guessing what her son has spotted, as if by playing for just a little longer she can stretch out the few remaining drops of his childhood before her baby is gone forever, replaced by the emerging young man beside her. The unfortunate truth is that for the last hour or two, the landscape has slowly transitioned to the scorched, blasted sand and rock of what was once the southern United States, and the only remotely green thing that exists for miles around is the approaching road sign. Even that can barely be considered green anymore, weathered and faded as it is, but in their relatively colourless surroundings it stands out like a sore thumb.

The three of them have been driving nearly non-stop since leaving D.C., with Emily and April trading off behind the wheel while the other tries to snag some hours of sleep where they can. Robbie begged to be given a chance to drive, but Emily held firm against his pleas. This was no time to test teenage driving skills. As they travelled further south, following the markers laid out by the beacon, they could see more and more of the destruction that has befallen their country. While they tried to steer clear of major cities, the effects of continuous rioting, domestic war, and intense climatic changes were written large over even the least populated areas. Great scars from weapons used long ago began to criss-cross their path with increasing regularity. Early in the trip the military presence had still been fairly strong, with armed soldiers patrolling the streets of the towns they passed through. But as they got further south, their regularity dwindled and the towns fell into greater disrepair, abandoned by the communities that once flourished within them.

Sooner than Emily had expected, entire cities emerged that had been reduced to rubble, with whatever structures that remained being left to decay. Drones occasionally buzzed overhead for miles after the military ground presence disappeared, but even those stopped when they crossed into 'unregulated territory' - land where the military had been unable to 'control' the populace. The most southern states had fractured long ago, devolving into competing factions that warred over increasingly rare resources while storms, drought, and pestilence stripped the land of all things green and growing.

And so it is that the sun-bleached road sign stands out among their dismal surroundings. "It's okay, Mom," Robbie sighs, admitting the pointless nature of the exercise. "How much further is it?"

"Not too much longer now, sweetie. I promise," she answers, glancing nervously at the timer ticking ever lower on the beacon. She racks her brain for another game to play

with her son, but nothing comes to mind. It's been a lifetime since she's been on a family road trip, and her foggy memories of childhood vacations aren't easily serving up the sort of distractions one might hope to occupy the attention of a fourteen-year-old. The road sign flies past, taking with it the last vestige of a playful attitude in the vehicle.

"Do you think Dad will catch up soon?" Robbie asks, his attempt at nonchalance displaying how nervous he is to a mother who knows him all too well.

"I'm sure he's right behind us, Robbie," she replies, though her own doubt gnaws at her insides. "In fact," she continues, "it's about time to leave him another marker." She eases the tank-like vehicle to a stop, not bothering to pull to the side of the road. They haven't seen another soul for a long time, so there isn't much point. After being gently woken, April trades places with Emily, sliding up behind the wheel and adjusting the visor to shield her eyes from the setting sun before bringing them back up to speed. Emily activates her implant and begins the scan to pick up the Network signal they've been trailing for the last hour. This far out from civilization the options are slim, but there are still stations putting out a signal here and there that they can jack into. The towers themselves are likely run by various rebel factions in their protected settlements, and so the three of them have made sure to keep their distance when they spot one, only skirting the edges of the projected signal. Luckily there isn't much to get in the way out here, and so those edges have been far enough out that Emily is pretty sure they have stayed anonymous.

She starts to record the same sort of message they have been leaving hourly for Danny. "Hi Danny, we're all still doing well. It's getting close to sundown and I'm hoping that you're not too far behind us now. There's not much to report on this stretch, Love. We haven't had to take any detours and we haven't run into any difficult terrain. With the straight shot we've been taking I'm expecting to see your headlights any minute now." Her voice quivers slightly and she takes a deep breath to steady herself before continuing. "We're making good time though. We should reach the pickup point with a good few hours to spare. Robbie, do you want to leave a message for your dad?"

Robbie turns and grins. "Hey old timer! Stop being such a slowpoke, you're making Mom nervous!" he shouts back and then shoots Emily a goofy thumbs up. Emily laughs and shakes her head. April leans back to add her two cents.

"Right, like mister cool over here hasn't chewed half his fingernails off already," she says with a laugh. Robbie gasps in mock defiance and pushes April's shoulder, igniting some playful roughhousing. Emily can't help but enjoy seeing the two of them enjoying themselves. It feels like laughter has been in short supply for so long that it strikes a glow in her chest.

However, the warm glow snaps suddenly into a shock of adrenaline as her eye catches the form of a small boy leaping over a concrete barrier and onto the road ahead. "LOOK OUT!" she screams, thrusting her hand forward to point out the child scrambling across their path. April shrieks and tenses, sharply turning the wheel to the

left and slamming on the brakes to avoid killing the only living being they've seen in ages. The vehicle skids, and the back end fishtails wildly as they swerve off course, smashing into the concrete barrier with a loud bang and a worrying crunching sound.

The trio seem paralyzed, as if the moment around them is hanging in the air along with the cloud of dust that slowly begins to settle. Then Robbie coughs, and the spell is broken. Emily frantically begins to check if anyone is injured, but they had all been strapped in and so they appear to be fine, if a little shaken up. April turns and meets Emily's eye, wearing an expression of abject dread.

"Is he....did I...." she stammers.

"I don't think we hit anything before the barrier, April," is Emily's reply, but internally she wonders whether they would even have felt the impact of such a soft figure against their military steel. The two hover there, each staring at the other, either unwilling or incapable of making the move to check whether or not a young life has just been stolen. Eventually it's Robbie who puffs up his chest, pulling on a shroud of bravado.

"I'll go check." He unclips his seatbelt and eases the passenger door open, taking a full breath before finally committing and flinging his lanky teenage form out into the dusk. Emily and April hang in the suspense, bracing themselves for the outcome of Robbie's excursion. The seconds clicking by on the beacon's timer seem to slow to an interminable pace and Emily feels her heartbeat pulsing unbearably quickly in comparison, until Robbie's voice breaks the silence.

"You're good!" he blurts out, rushing back into view. The tension pops like an overfull water balloon and the two women practically collapse into each other in relief. Emily turns to her son.

"You're sure?"

"There's dust and sand all over. His tracks go right across and off over there," he responds while pointing north, "there's no way you hit him."

"Oh thank god!" April exclaims, flopping back into her seat and covering her face. "I don't think I could have handled that. We should make sure he's okay!" She composes herself and jumps out of the truck, starting to trek across the road in the direction that Robbie pointed. At the edge of the road she pauses, shielding her eyes against the last rays of sunlight and searching the encroaching darkness for the boy.

"Hello!? Are you okay?" she shouts out into the fading light, straining her ears for an answer that doesn't come. Emily sidles up beside her with a curious look in her eyes.

"Where did he go?" she asks, but all April can do is shrug. "That's...weird..." she offers after a moment.

"I probably scared the bejeezus out of him," April says. "Maybe I should go and have a look."

She starts to step forward, but Emily places a hand out to stop her. "I don't know April. We don't know what's out there and it's getting dark. Maybe we should stick with the car."

"Is everything okay?" April asks, not sure how to take Emily's strange demeanor. Emily squints out into the rapidly approaching night and opens her mouth to respond, but before she can, Robbie calls out to them, snapping their attention back towards the crash site.

"I think we're okay here too!" he calls, examining the front end of the vehicle. "This thing is a brick shithouse, there's barely a dent in the fender!"

"Robbie! Language!" Emily scolds, though the news is certainly welcome. The two women walk back over to examine the damage for themselves, and while the minimal dent should have been more relieving, Emily can't shake the feeling that she's missing something important.

Robbie is actually the one that puts it into words first. "Where did that kid come from anyway? What's he doing way out here in the middle of nowhere?"

The thought unnerves Emily. "Guys, let's get back in the truck," she says with finality.

"Everything okay, Mom?"

"Yeah, it's fine, let's just get in the truck and get back on the road." Her serious tone bleeds an uneasy fear into the other two.

"Emily, what's going on?" April asks, coming in close and lowering her voice for reasons she doesn't quite understand.

Emily leans in, worry spreading rapidly across her face as she eyes the darkness around them. The she whispers, "I don't think we're alone out here..."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Terry Myson

Despite the cheers and congratulations erupting from the rebel soldiers all around him, Terry's thoughts are wrapped in dark storm clouds. He would love to join his subordinates in raucous celebration, but with the revelations of the past few hours he feels there is little room for festivities. His expression hardens as a captain provides him an updated casualty report. Reuger Arms had been secured surprisingly quickly after the drone defenses had mysteriously rebooted, but they had still suffered significant losses when his advance team ran up against military troops that shouldn't have been there. *It's clear that someone has given us away. But who? And how compromised are our plans moving forward?*

Terry's line of questioning is cut short as a gap in the mass of soldiers milling about reveals a sight he had feared he might never see again. Letting all pretense drop, he rushes forward, calling out to the massive figure coming through the doors at the far end of the lobby. "Sean!!"

Sean's head snaps to the direction of the call and as their eyes meet, Terry can see a flood of relief wash through the man he loves. Catching himself just in time, Terry slows on the final few paces of his approach and instead of throwing himself into Sean's arms like he wants to, he reaches forward to grasp his forearm and pull him into a manly one-armed hug.

"Terry, thank god. I wasn't sure what we were going to find when we got here. You had me scared out of my damn mind," Sean says, pulling Terry back for one more squeeze before releasing him and taking a moment to compose himself.

"*You* were scared? I heard that your position was overrun,

"I dunno Ter, something stinks. They knew exactly where we were, and they came in force."

"Tell me about it. It's not like I was expecting to waltz through here unhampered, but they knew we were coming for sure," Terry responds with a puzzled huff.

"You think Finn gave us up?" Sean asks as he racks his brain for an answer.

"Danny? I'd find that hard to believe, he took a massive risk for us today."

"True, but maybe they cornered him and he turned to save his family."

"I don't think so, Sean. Whoever it was knew too much, and supplied the army with that information with enough time for them to be set up in advance."

"Yeah, you're right. There's no way Finn could have given up all three positions with enough time for them to set up those ambushes."

"Wait," Terry holds up a hand to pause the conversation, "what do you mean *three* positions?"

"Jesus, I can't believe no one's reported this to you yet. Home base got taken out. Luckily, we got an SOS out to LaToya and she was able to grab what she could and

escape before the attack hit in earnest, but it was a close call. She's on her way here now with as much equipment and personnel as they could salvage."

"GodDAMNIT!" Terry yells, turning and punching his fist clear through the drywall beside him. "What the hell, Sean? Are we fucked? How much do they know? And who the hell told them?"

"I think I can shed some light on that!" The bright female voice cuts across the din, and Terry turns to see Shelley Crimson limping determinedly toward them.

"Shelley, damn you're a sight for sore eyes," Sean calls out, pulling her comparatively tiny frame into a fierce bear hug that lifts her feet clear off the floor. The slight cry she lets out and the sharp wince that follows it cause Sean to gently place her back down, apologizing profusely. "Sorry Shell! Didn't mean to-"

"Forget it," she laughs, "I'm not some delicate thing, you just caught me off guard. It's good to see you both."

"You've got some intel for me?" Terry probes, eschewing any pleasantries.

"You bet Boss, but you're not going to like it. Your mole is Denzil. Turns out he's been working for 'the man' all along. I guess he and Brad Jones were tighter than we thought."

Terry's eyes flash with unbridled anger as he processes this new information. "Denzil?? You gotta be shitting me. That *motherfucker*. Where is he? I'm gonna smash him six ways from Sunday when I get my hands on him!!"

"You might be happy to know you're a bit late on that front. You'll find what's left of him down in the parkade. Danny took him out, but not before he put a couple holes in me and finished off Shanaghan."

Terry's jaw clenches tight and he eyes the drywall with another clenched fist before a thought occurs to him and he turns excitedly towards Sean. "Shanaghan...wait, Sean, the kid! Where's the kid, does he have the device?"

Sean feels his cheeks flush and his mouth opens and closes a few times before he can bring himself to say the words. "Terry, I'm sorry, the kid ran off. I tried, I swear, but they were all over us, I couldn't go after him. He might have gotten away, but...well, I wouldn't put money on it."

Every muscle in Terry's body clenches and he can feel his blood pressure skyrocket as frustration courses through him, building until he releases a loud, anguished stream of profanities. All eyes turn and linger on their commander-in-chief. Terry glances around, aware of the staring faces and wanting to put up a strong front, but his rage flares one last time and instead he yells out, "For FUCK'S SAKE! Doesn't anyone around here have some GOOD news for me?!"

Silence descends in the lobby as Terry's words echo around the chamber, until finally, one hand meekly rises, and a young soldier steps forward. "Actually, sir, I believe I do."

An hour later, LaToya leans back in the expensive chair behind Manny's desk, in awe of the systems her implant has finally tapped into. The young soldier had led Terry and his companions up through the gold-plated elevator to reveal that he had made significant progress hacking into Rueger's mainframe, giving them unprecedented access to security systems and inventory caches not just within the factory grounds, but across the whole city.

When she had arrived, LaToya had made quick work of the remaining firewall defenses, and now she sits at Manny's enormous desk, giving Terry the good news he badly needs. "Damn, the kid's right Terry. I don't know who Manny had to buy off to get this kind of access, but Rueger's got fingers in pretty much every pie imaginable."

"Just give me the highlights, LaToya, we don't have a lot of time," Terry encourages, anticipation bringing him onto the balls of his feet as he leans on the desktop. His insistence prompts Sean to pipe up.

"Are we in a rush, Terry?"

"You bet your ass we are. We have to assume that Denzil gave the military all the information he had access to. That means that our original timeline for our attack plan on government strongholds is useless. Our only hope is to strike as soon as possible, before they can regroup after losing this place and get proper defences in order."

"That's going to be tough, Terry," LaToya adds. "With home base lost, a lot of our troops are scattered. I get the idea behind a blitz, but it's probably going to take a few days for *us* to regroup, let alone replan a multi-faceted attack."

"No good," Terry snaps, although he immediately softens. "Sorry, I'm letting the stress get the better of me, but we don't have that kind of time. It's the same reason we had to move up our attack on Rueger. If the government accesses the antidote device, there's no coming back."

Concern and confusion surges across LaToya's face. "Wait, what?"

Sean sighs heavily and runs a hand over his stubbly chin. "Yeah, we think Shanaghan handed the device off to a kid, told him to get it to Terry. I...well, there's no way around it, I lost him. He ran off when we had to abandon our post. I can't imagine they don't have him by now."

"A kid?" asks LaToya.

"Yeah, go figure. Fate of the world, and I couldn't hold on to a stupid kid."

LaToya squints, and her fingers fly over holographic controls. "Is it this kid?" An image of Samar floats into view.

"Yeah, that's him! How'dya find that?" Sean asks, incredulous.

"That makes a lot of sense. Sean, they don't have him. No way. Not with the resources they've still got deployed trying to find him. His image is plastered all over their security feeds."

Terry visibly relaxes. "Hot damn, that's the best news I've heard all day. LaToya, are you telling me you've got a direct line into their feed?"

LaToya lets out an indignant snort.

"Oh man, Terry. I've got a lot more than that. Manny built back-door access into every drone he put out from this factory. I've got eyes all over town, access to drone patrol protocol, weapons holds in a bunch of sectors - along with the codes to access them...essentially, from this room, Manny Rueger could have exerted his will over pretty much the whole city. And now I can."

The bold smirk displayed on LaToya's face catches on, and pretty soon possibilities are dancing in the eyes of everyone in the room. Terry's mind races, weighing all the factors involved in what he is about to ask of everyone.

"Okay, okay...LaToya, any chance you can get us inside the Pentagon?" Her fingers flick like lightning as she navigates the system she is still becoming accustomed to.

"Sorry Terry, looks like the Pentagon and all of it's defenses are on an independent server. If we could get a man on the inside they could patch me in, but barring that I'm not getting anywhere near the government mainframe."

"That's alright, it was a longshot anyway."

Sean leans in. "What are you thinking, Terry?"

"If the government is already aware of our original plan, and we have to assume they are, then there's only one choice - change it. If that kid is out there with the device, it's only a matter of time before he's found."

"What if we find him first?" Sean asks, eager for an opportunity to redeem himself.

"We could devote our resources to finding him, sure. But in the end, without access to government systems even if we did find him all we'd have is a bargaining chip."

"Then what's the play?"

"It's like LaToya said. We lead a blitz. No more piecemeal attacks, no more subterfuge, no more sneaking around. We grab every fucking gun we can and we go for the heart."

"You want us to initiate a full-scale assault on the Pentagon?" LaToya asks quietly. "When?"

Terry stares out of the enormous plate windows lining the office, breathing in the scenery before turning back to his ever-shrinking inner circle with hard-lined ferocity. "Tonight."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Terry Myson

A static whine rings out as LaToya patches Terry's into every implant and intercom speaker across the Rueger complex. Startled rebels stop in their tracks and stand to attention. Terry takes one last look at Sean, drawing as much support from his partner's reassuring gaze as he can. He knows that what he is about to say will either make or break their efforts, but there's no room for hesitation now. He adjusts his hold on the microphone in his hand.

"Good afternoon, Rebel Commander Terry Myson here. I'd like you to stop whatever you're doing and lend me your attention for a few minutes. First of all, I'd like to congratulate you all on a hard-won battle this morning. You persevered against incredible odds to give the rebel cause the most decisive victory we've ever had. What you accomplished today will go down in the history books as the moment you turned the tide in the fight for freedom, and you should all be damn proud.

Every one of you deserves the opportunity to celebrate this win. To rest and reward yourselves for a job well done. We lost good soldiers today. Friends and family that gave their lives to give us the chance for a better tomorrow. Every one of you deserves the opportunity to grieve. To remember and honor our fallen comrades.

Every one of you deserves these things, and I wish with every fiber of my being that I could give them to you. But the fact of the matter is that after everything you have given today, I am standing here asking you for more.

We have a chance. One chance, and only one, to change the course of all our lives today for the better. To throw off the shackles of oppression and forge a new future for everyone.

I know you're tired. I know you're injured. I won't force anyone to take part in what comes next. If you want to lay down your arms and sit this one out, no one will think less of you for it, because what I am about to ask of you is no simple task. But I want you to look into the eyes of the people around you, and to remember the faces of those you'll never be able to look upon again. Think about everything they have sacrificed to bring us to this moment. Everything *you* have sacrificed. Ask yourselves what you would give to finally live a free life. A life of your own choosing. A life truly worthy of living.

Tonight, that is what we fight for. Tonight, we strike at the heart of those who would put a boot on your neck and hold you down. Tonight, we end the fighting for good, one way or another. Fight with us. Fight with *me*, side by side, and I promise you we will bring down our oppressors. Thanks to you, we finally have the firepower to effect real change. Thanks to you the finish line is finally in sight.

Now, I ask you to stand with me. Stand for what's right. Stand for your freedom. Stand up and let them know that we will no longer suffer their tyranny. Let them know

that we are a *free* people, with a *purpose*, and that the people we love did not die in vain!

Stand with me one last time tonight, and together, we will change the world!"

Terry lowers his microphone and cuts the broadcast feed. For a moment, he looks around with a terrible vulnerability, unsure whether his words will carry the weight required to inspire his soldiers to this final task. Then, slowly, seemingly from every direction at once, with a fervour that reverberates through the walls of the office perched on top of the massive factory, a roaring battle cry rises. Fighting back tears of relief, he glances first to LaToya, plugged into her makeshift command center, and then to Sean, who defiantly racks a round into the chamber of his rifle. Terry's eyes glint with a spark of hope that he hasn't allowed himself to feel in a long time. He cracks his knuckles and nods, giving one last word of encouragement, "Let's go to work."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Danny Finn

"Are you sure you don't want me to take over, Danny?"

Behind the wheel of the SUV, Danny glances over at Clint, eyeing him carefully. "Do you think you're up for it?"

"Yeah, yeah I'm good man," Clint says in an attempt to reassure him, but Danny can see the strain behind his eyes. As the effects of the Spike have worn off, Clint has gone through waves of shakiness, nausea, and foggy thinking. The last time Danny let him behind the wheel he looked like he was doing just fine, and then after an hour and a half he nearly drove them into a ditch. Danny had just been drifting off when the tires hitting gravel startled him awake.

"Let me see your hands," he asks gently. Clint bites his lower lip, and a slight look of shame emerges as he extends his hands to reveal the tremors he has been trying to conceal. "Sorry Clint, I just don't think we can risk it again right now. I'm sure you'll be up to it soon."

"Mr. Finn, I swear I'm good! I feel a lot better after Neil took a look at me, and you need to rest. Not to mention those bandages need a change." Clint's insistent tone gives Danny pause. He isn't sure exactly what Neil did when he took Clint into the back seats. He made vague mentions of "quantum touch" something-or-other. Danny has never gone in for much of that new-age, holistic garbage. He does have to admit, though, that Clint came back a hell of a lot better than he had been. He's tempted to chalk it up to a combination of some rest and a bit of placebo effect, except that when he'd first woken in that alley after blacking out, Neil had a finger on each of his temples, and he wasn't experiencing any of the concussion symptoms he'd been sure he'd have to deal with.

He shakes the line of thought loose. What matters now is the present moment, and he can't afford to let Clint behind the wheel when he's still shaky. There's no telling if there's another wave of withdrawal effects coming. "Hm, I don't think it's a good idea, but you're right about one thing. I need to take a break and change these bandages. What about you Neil?" he asks, catching the unnerving gaze of the young man in the rearview mirror. "You think you can take her for a while?"

"Her?" Neil responds with a puzzled look.

"The *car*, Neil, do you think you can drive for a bit?" Danny answers with a slight note of exasperation. He still can't get used to Neil's quirks around communication, and his throbbing head is making his temper short.

"Oh! I forgot that you gender your vehicles sometimes," Neil says with a laugh.

"What the hell is that supposed mean?" Danny mutters under his breath, although not so quiet that Neil doesn't catch the gist.

"Nothing, sorry," he dismisses, "I just don't spend much time in cars is all. I'm not the most experienced driver, but I could give it a go. And Clint can keep an eye on me, right buddy?"

Danny isn't sure if he's just imagining it now, but the way Neil stresses the word 'buddy' seems...off, somehow. Unnatural. *Now isn't the time to quibble over his weird speech patterns*, Danny thinks, disregarding his suspicions for the time being. "Well, you handled her...*it*...the car, I mean, pretty well back in the parking garage. Thanks again for that."

A dark look clouds Neil's face for just a moment before his sunny disposition returns. "Yes, well, what's done is done. Pull over and I'll let you get some rest back here."

After switching places and nervously watching for the first five or ten minutes, Danny relaxes and turns to changing his bandages. "Clint, do you have another gauze pack, mate?"

Trauma and oppression by the military aside, Clint's army uniform is surprisingly well equipped, and Danny can't help but be thankful to have the extra supplies as Clint tosses fresh gauze and some antiseptic back to him. "That's the last of the gauze, Mr. Finn, but we've still got some antiseptic wipes left."

"I appreciate it, Clint, hopefully we'll get where we're going before we need anything else." As if on cue, Danny's implant picks up a weak broadcast signal and one of Emily's guiding messages pings into his inbox. The one-way piggyback method of communication has been suspenseful to say the least, but it's kept them on track so far, and every time one comes up Danny feels an immense weight lift from his shoulders.

He gestures to activate the message's icon as he finishes securing his bandage, and feels a burst of warmth envelop his heart when Emily's voice rings out. She mentions that she's recording the message just before sundown, and Danny realizes with relief that they have been gaining on them; they can only be behind by two, maybe three hours at the most. He can't help but grin as Robbie's voice chastises him as an "old timer" and a "slowpoke". *At least they're in good spirits*, he thinks gladly, his desire to hug his family once again tugging on his heartstrings.

Suddenly, the colour drains from his face as he hears a shout and a loud bang. It's the unmistakable sound of a crash, and he grips the seat in front of him tightly. "Mr. Finn, are you okay?" Clint asks, concerned to see his change in attitude. Danny puts up a frantic hand to shush him, his attention entirely focused on the sound of the message. He starts to relax slightly when he can hear everyone start to speak again, sounding shaken but safe. Curiously, the message continues. Danny realizes that Emily must have forgotten she was recording, but he decides to listen to the whole thing to make sure he doesn't miss any important information.

After a few moments, the tone of Emily's voice changes to one that Danny knows all too well of late: *fear*. He listens intently.

April: Emily, what's going on?

Emily: I don't think we're alone out hereshhh.....wait, what's tha-...EVERYONE IN THE TRUCK, NOW!!

[Hard breathing]

[Frantic shuffling]

Robbie (distant): Shit! Mom, look out!

[BANG]

[April cries out]

Emily: April!! Get up! Fuck, where'd they go? Robbie, where are they??

Robbie: I can't see! I can't s-[BANG]-aah! Fuck, are those rubber bullets?

Emily: Just stay down! April? April, wake up!

[BANG]

Robbie: I can't reach the door!

[Tires braking hard]

[Engines cutting out]

Man 1: Hooooooooo! What we got, Earl?

Earl: Issa gud'un Tanner! Two laydees anna kiyud!

Tanner: Well lessee if dey got annithin eylse!!

[Heavy footsteps approaching]

Emily (quiet and hurried): April, April, come on, pleeeeeease we have to move, we have to....shit - ROBBIE, JUST RUN!!

Tanner: Huh? Whoa!

[SMACK]

[Grunt]

[Gasp]

[Sounds of a struggle]

[Tanner cries out in pain]

Earl: Wooo! We got a liiive'un!

[Thud]

[Emily screams]

Earl: Howya doin' Tanner?

Tanner: Bitch fuggin' bit me, Earl!

[Smack]

[Emily cries out]

[Body hitting the ground]

Robbie: Mom!!

Emily: Robbie no!!

Earl: Wut de ff-Aah!

[Whack]

[Impact against the truck]

[Sound of Robbie striking Earl several times]

Robbie: You stay the FUCK away from her!!

Tanner: Hey!

[Thud]

[Robbie cries out, growls, screams aggressively]

[Thwack, grunt, body hitting the ground hard]

Robbie: Mom, get out of here!!

[Smack, smack, smack]

Robbie: Fuck! [Smack] You! [Smack, crunch of bone]

Earl: Hey you lil' fugger!

[Crack]

[Robbie yelps]

Earl: Tanner, you okay?

[Groan]

Earl: Tanner!

Tanner: Yeea I'm jyust dayundy. Tink dat lil' cocksugger broge m'dayum nose!

Earl: You lil' sunnuva bitch. You know wut we do with rabid dawgs?

[Gun cocking]

Emily: NOO! PLEASE NO!!! We'll stop, we'll STOP! PLEASE! We'll do whatever you want just don't hurt him!!

[Tires squealing]

[Shotgun blast]

Deep Voice: Now whut inna Sayum Hell is goin' on here!?

[Pause]

Earl: Geez, Colter, I'm sorry - the kiyud's sum kinda...Kung-Fu fugger.

Colter: You tellin' me you two fuggups cayun't handle two wimmin anna kiyud?

Tanner: Hey, Colter mayun, you shudda seena way this lil' fugger moved mayun!

Colter: Well gud! If he c'n fug you two up at half yer size, then I waynt 'im! Bag 'im and get 'im back t'base!

[Robbie struggles]

Robbie: Mom!

Emily: Please! Please don't hurt him. I'm sorry, we didn't mean any offense, please just let us go! We'll leave and you'll never see us again.

Colter: Well now don't you fret lil' miss. We ain't gunna hurt 'im none. Nor you, s'long as you cooperate. Y'feel me? The Brutherhood ain't inna business of hurtin' dem dat's useful. 'Speshly a fine, luvly laydee such as yerself...

[Emily spits]

Colter: Heh. Always wuz partial to breakin' in a new mare.

[THUD]

The message cuts out and Danny's eyes are fixed in a wide, panicked stare. Clint waves a hand in front of his face to try and snap him out of his trance-like state. Reality crashes back in around him and fury builds like a furnace deep inside.

"Neil, step on it."

"I'm sorry, step on...?"

"Neil, goddamnit, put the GAS PEDAL on the FLOOR, NOW!!!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Danny Finn

After just over an hour and a half of pushing the SUV to its absolute limit, they screech to a halt ten feet back from the abandoned military truck. Danny leaps from the door almost before they come to a complete stop and sprints over to the last location where he can definitively place his family. Unsure of what he expected to find, he frantically scans the area. The back hatch of the truck is open, and the supplies have been stripped from it. All around are the signs of the struggle that he played on repeat while they sped here, memorizing every torturous detail in an attempt to glean any possible clue as to where his family might now be. The headlights from the SUV light up the dusty ground, revealing little pools and trails of blood that nearly break Danny as his panic rises.

He takes several deep breaths to keep from completely losing himself and focuses on the memory of the satisfying crunch from Robbie's punch. *Good boy, Robbie*, he thinks, *you stood your ground and made them pay*. His thoughts flit proudly over to hearing Emily's defiant spit in the face of Colter, and the man's ensuing words bring him dangerously close to the edge of an uncontrollable rage.

"Danny! Over here!" Clint's shout snaps Danny back to the practicalities of the situation. As he jogs over, Clint indicates the ground. "It's their tracks, of their vehicles, I mean. From what I can see I'd say three ATV's, one of them hauling a small trailer."

"That must be why the truck is still here," Danny muses, "they didn't have enough drivers to take the extra vehicle."

"Then they'll be coming back for it. We could set up an ambush?" Clint suggests.

Danny looks around at the surrounding area, his mind racing through the possibilities until it alights on the most pressing factor. Striding quickly over to the front of the truck, he sees the deactivated beacon device still affixed to the dashboard. Whispering a prayer of thanks he presses the button, confirming his fear. "We don't know when they'll be back, and we don't have that kind of time. We've got less than six hours to get to the pickup point." The feeling of helplessness starts to strangle Danny from inside, and the more he tries to think of a solution, the harder it gets to breathe. "Fuck! Think, Danny, *think!!*" Kicking the side of the truck in frustration he sinks to his knees and buries his face in his hands. His shoulders heave as he struggles to pull in ragged breaths.

Suddenly the world seems to still, and he looks up to find Neil crouched on the ground beside him, a hand placed on his rapidly unclenching shoulder. His eyes lock onto Neil's unnerving gaze and for a moment Danny is sure he sees....something....but just as quickly as it came it evaporates like mist in the morning sun, and Danny finds his mind slowly clicking back into gear, his panic sliding away.

"Come on, Danny Finn," Neil says in a voice that is somehow gentle and forceful at the same time. "I believe in you. You're always setting things right, remember?"

"Who *are* you?" Danny asks, puzzlement creasing his brow.

"That's not important right now, it's time for us to find your family," comes the response, and just like that Danny's questions subside as his thinking becomes laser focused.

"Brotherhood. The leader, he said the Brotherhood. That's got to be the Brotherhood of Freedom. When the South fractured, the Brotherhood took over bunkers and bases all over the place. Base...he said "get him back to base" - that means they're likely above ground, that's good. ATVs aren't super long-distance vehicles, so they can't be far. Factoring in a return journey we're looking at one, maybe two hours away. Clint! Can you see what direction the tracks are going?"

Clint's face lights up as something occurs to him. "I can do better than that Mr. Finn! I don't know why I didn't think of this right away! My military implant has all sorts of tracking equipment, following their trail should be no problem!"

"Looks like you get your wish then. Let's get you behind the wheel."

The darkness presses in all around them, matching Danny's mood. There is only a sliver of moon in the sky, and though the starscape is majestic, it provides little in the way of light to see by. Covering most of the instruments on the dash leaves the faintest of glows on Clint's face, and as much as he is tempted to try and see where they are going, Danny fixates on that barely illuminated visage, watching for any signs of another Spike withdrawal wave. Out here in the wilderness, he had reasoned, any vehicle with headlights would be seen approaching from miles away, and so the plan is to let Clint's thermal and infrared vision, along with an algorithm scanning for the treads of the fresh ATV tracks, guide them through the black towards the base. It had taken a moment for his implant to boot up the necessary programs, but once it was activated it had picked up the trail plain as day.

After what feels to Danny like an eternity, they crest a small rise in the terrain and the brightly lit base comes into view in the distance. Danny's eyes snap to the glow and narrow. Though it's not as large and formidable as Danny had been expecting, the towers topped with searchlights scanning the surrounding countryside create an interesting obstacle. "Alright Clint, we don't want them seeing or hearing us coming; stealth is our only advantage here. Get us going at a decent clip and then cut the engine. We'll use our momentum on this slope to glide in silently as close as we can while staying out of range of those lights."

"Yes sir," Clint acknowledges, frowning slightly when he realizes that he is instinctually in military mission mode. "I mean, got it Mr. Finn."

"It's okay, Clint. I can't imagine how confusing this all must be for you, but as much as I hate to admit it, right now I don't need civilian Clint, I need soldier Clint." Clint's face hardens and he gives a slight nod.

"Roger that."

Once the armoured truck has rolled to a stop, the three of them crouch behind it and use a small flashlight to take inventory and make a plan. Neil had spent the trip over gathering everything they had at their disposal and now it was laid in an organized fashion on the ground before them. Danny surveys the haul. "Alright, we've got one assault rifle with three magazines, two handguns: one fully loaded, and one with five, wait-" he quickly does a check and finds a round already chambered, "*six* bullets remaining. Looks like there's a flashbang, two smoke grenades, and one frag grenade. We could do worse. Neil, you ever used one of these?" he asks, gesturing to one of the handguns. The bewildered look on Neil's face tells Danny everything he needs to know about that. "Okay, listen up buddy. You're going to stay here and guard the vehicles, okay?" The relief in Neil's eyes is plain to see. Danny picks up the fully loaded handgun and passes it to Neil. "This is for you. The safety is on right now, so it can't fire. If anyone other than us, Emily, April, or Robbie comes this way, you just flick the safety off here, like this," he says, demonstrating before reinstating the safety, "point it at them, and squeeze the trigger. Easy peasy." *Lemon squeezey, right*, Danny thinks sarcastically, *let's just hope it doesn't come to that*. Neil's uncertain grip on the weapon doesn't fill Danny with confidence, but Neil nods all the same.

"Don't worry, Danny. I can protect the vehicles."

"Good man. Clint, with your implant you can see things I can't. I need you to be my eyes. We're going to take one of the watchtowers together, and from there you can guide me as I go in. Take the rifle and cover me if things go sideways."

"Wait, if you're going in alone, shouldn't you take the rifle?"

"I don't think it's smart. We can't take on a whole base. Our best bet is to get in, find our family, and get out without raising an alarm. If I start firing rounds, I'll have the whole place on me in seconds. I've got the knife I took from Denzil. I'll take the second handgun, and some of those grenades for insurance, but if I have to use them, I'd rather have you able to cover me from above."

"I guess that makes sense. It's not much of a plan, but it's better than nothing," Clint says before hoisting the rifle and pocketing the extra mags.

"Time waits for no man, let's get it done," says Danny. "Neil, unhook the cars and then stay frosty. If we kick up a commotion, we need to be ready to leave in a hurry."

Getting close to the watchtower is a simple matter of timing. Weaving their way through the overlapping searchlights, Danny and Clint sprint to the base of the wooden structure. It's little more than a glorified treehouse perched on top of what looks like an old windmill frame. Giving each other one final look of affirmation, the duo split into their pre-determined roles. Heading to opposite sides of the tower, the two begin to scale the

framing, staying as tight to the larger beams as possible. Once they reach the base of the cabin, Danny braces and readies himself to jump while Clint begins to make a light tapping noise on the opposite wall.

Watching carefully through a crack in the boards, Danny sees the guard's ears perk up. A curious expression crosses his face as he turns and walks across to the source of the noise. As soon as his back is turned, Danny heaves himself over the railing, absorbing the impact to land silently. He stalks up behind the unwitting guard, who innocently leans over to see what the source of the tapping is. When the barrel of the guard's rifle is sufficiently extended over the railing, Clint lunges up to snatch the weapon. Simultaneously, Danny strikes down hard with the blade of his right hand into the radial nerve just above the wrist, deadening the guard's grip, then immediately striking deeply into the side of the neck with the blade of his left hand. The rifle slips easily out of the guard's hands as he wobbles on his feet, stunned by the blow to the neck. Danny uses this moment to seize the man's collar in a cross grip, twisting his knuckles deep into the windpipe to cut off his airflow and prevent him from crying out. The man's eyes go wide as Danny sweeps his legs out from underneath him and rides the momentum down to the ground, crushing his throat completely on impact.

Clint quickly climbs the rest of the way into the cabin with an astonished expression on his face. Leaning in close, he whispers to Danny, "Damn Mr. Finn, you never showed me that move..."

"Listen carefully, Clint. These men stole our family and right now could be doing god knows what with them. I'm not fucking around. If you get the opportunity to take one out, don't hesitate. Understand?"

"Yes sir," Clint responds, with a new level of respect in his tone. "Okay, I've linked our implants on a private channel, so we'll be able to communicate while you're out there."

"Great, does your thermal imaging show you anything?"

Clint activates the filter on his implant and begins to survey the scene. "The outbuildings to the left have a lot of heat signatures, I'm guessing that's a barracks of some kind. You should steer clear of those if you can. Wait, over there, on the right. The building with a sloped roof, there's only one signature that I can see inside, a smaller one, and two big guys out front. Probably guards - that's gotta be one of them, right?"

"Only one way to find out." Danny slides down the metal ladder in the centre of the watchtower and then, waiting for just the right moment, sprints across an open expanse to slide behind a low wall like a baseball player breaking for home plate. Clint's voice crackles into his ear.

"Good stuff, Mr. Finn. Make your way to the far end of that wall, but stay low. There are some people out on patrol. I'll let you know if anyone gets too close." By the time Danny crawls the length of the three-foot-tall wall, Clint issues a warning. "Stop. Don't move, Mr. Finn. There's someone coming your way. Shit, there's three of them. I don't

think they've seen you, but they're approaching your position from your nine. Just stay real still, Mr. Finn. I've got them in my sights, but I won't shoot unless I have to."

Danny presses himself into the corner where the wall meets the ground, hoping that he can remain unseen for the time being. Just in case, he slowly draws his knife and readies his other hand on his pistol. A moment later he hears the crunch of heavy boots approaching. Danny quiets his breathing as much as he can while a shadow extends over the wall. The large figure pauses, sighs heavily, turns, and sits directly atop where Danny is hiding.

"Gimme one dem cigs, Earl," comes the deep voice, and Danny has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from reacting to the sound of Colter's familiar intonation. *It's him, he's right there*, he thinks. *I could take him out right now, the sanctimonious prick. Steady, Danny, you can't give yourself away yet...* There's the click of a small metal case being opened, and the rustle of a few cigarettes being fished out before the flick of a lighter being ignited.

"Dat's betta. How's da boy? You git 'im calmed down sum?" asks Colter. Danny tenses, wondering if he's talking about Robbie. Earl's voice is the one that answers.

"He might not be up 'n round fer a spell, but I think the procedyure took pritty good. He got fire innim, but he'll learn."

Procedure? Danny thinks, concern rising. *What the hell have they done?*

"Good, good," Colter replies, taking a long drag on his cigarette. He taps the end of it over the wall and a chunk of smouldering tobacco ash lands on Danny's neck, searing uncomfortably into his flesh. But he doesn't dare move to brush it off. A third voice that sounds stuffed-up speaks next.

"Not sure both dem wimmin worth the hassle though, iff'n y'ask me," it states darkly, and Danny recognizes the twang of Tanner mumbling through his broken nose.

"He's probly right, Colter," Earl adds, a hint of animosity filtering through his words. Colter sighs heavily again, takes a last long drag, and flicks the butt out into the darkness.

"Arright den, Tanner. Go sign out a gun frum lockup."

"You gunna let me at da blonde?"

"The blonde's up w'me in da big house, y'can have da udder one."

"Best watch out Colter, she a biter," Tanner mentions with a snort.

"You leave the tamin' ta me, takes a real mayun." Colter heaves his weight up and starts to head off.

"Think I'll catch flak iff'n I have me a bit'u fun first?" Tanner asks coyly, and Danny hears Earl huff and lean against the wall, puffing agitatedly on his cigarette. "Ah heck, Earl," Tanner mumbles, "wut crawled up yer butt?"

"Tanner, goddammit," sighs Earl, "jist git it done."

"Donchu worry 'bout me!" Tanner answers with a giddy slant to his words, and then Danny hears a pair of boots jogging away. Rage burns brightly within him. He knows

he's got no time to lose, and then he hears Clint give him the news he's been waiting for.

"It's just him Mr. Finn, there's no one else around."

Danny springs up behind Earl, who starts in surprise, slightly losing his balance and raising a hand in defense. But it's too late. With a ferocity he didn't know he was capable of, Danny stabs the knife straight through the upraised hand and plunges the blade deep into Earl's throat, using the momentum of the strike to pull him over the wall and to the ground. Danny pins him there, leaning his weight into the blade, pushing it through the man's spinal column as he stares him straight in the eyes until the light inside goes out.

He rolls the body into the pool of shadow he had just been hiding in and checks in. "Clint, tell me you've got eyes on Colter."

"I'm tracking him now, Mr. Finn, I'll let you know where he goes. But if that's my mom in the shed, you've got to get her before Tanner gets back."

"I won't let anything happen to her, Clint." Waiting for the right moment, Danny sprints the final fifty meters to the back of the building with the sloped roof. "Mr. Finn, you'd better hurry. Tanner? He's already got his gun and he's crossing the courtyard now." With urgency pumping adrenaline through his veins, Danny searches until he finds what he is looking for: a small window at the back of the building. Peeking in, he can see April shackled to one side of the small room, which looks like it's used for storage when not functioning as a prison. Using his knife to gently pry open the window's lock, he then slides the pane of glass up.

At the sound, April glances in his direction and lets out a shriek of fear. Danny quickly puts his finger up to his lips to quiet her and sees April's face turn from shock to recognition. Her mouth gapes open, and the two of them freeze as one of the guards out front bangs on the heavy door and shouts threateningly. "Quit yer yappin'! Ain't nobody gunna hear ya that gives two shits!"

Knowing he doesn't have much time, Danny vaults into the room and rushes to April's side. "Jeezus Danny! You scared me half to death! Whose blood is that!?" she hisses.

"Blood?" Danny asks in puzzlement, but when he reaches his hand up to his face, he realizes why April had been scared. His face is absolutely dripping with Earl's blood. He must have been caught in the arterial spray without even noticing. Seeing a frenzied face covered in blood materializing out of the darkness would have been enough to frighten anyone.

"Shit, sorry. Listen, we've got to get you out of here. Where's Emily and Robbie?"

"I don't know, Danny. They took them somewhere else. Get me out of these things!"

Danny eyes the lock on the shackle and starts looking for something to break it with when suddenly Clint crackles in Danny's ear. "Mr. Finn, you're out of time. Tanner's

gonna be there in about ten seconds." Motioning for April to remain quiet, he positions himself in the corner behind the door, readying himself. Right on cue they hear Tanner's voice outside.

"You two numbskulls git outta my way. Colter sent me to take care 'o dat biyutch. Might be a minute." There are a couple of grumbles from the men outside, but the sound of a shotgun being cocked seems to still any complaints. There's a jangle of keys followed by the click of the lock turning, and then Tanner bursts through the door. April starts to pull at her restraints, screaming and shouting to draw the man's attention, while the door slowly closes behind him. Tanner's self-satisfied grin at the terror he is causing slowly morphs into bewilderment when April ceases to struggle and instead offers him a wicked smirk and a wink. Before he knows what's happening, he feels a warmth flood onto his chest, and when he looks down he recognizes in horror that it's caused by the blood flowing out of the smooth gash opening on his throat. He opens his mouth to yell, but all he can do is softly gurgle. Turning to look behind him, he finds himself face-to-face with Danny, who slides the knife point easily up under his chin and into his brain.

Cradling the man as he crumples to the ground, Danny gently takes the shotgun from his hands, and motions for April to plug her ears. Knowing that the two guards outside will be expecting a gunshot, he aims high and lets a blast ring out. Quickly as he can, he drags the body to the corner behind the door and then puts on his best Tanner impression. "Hey, wunna you numbskulls bring dem keys in here and help me carry out dis bitch's body!" When he sees April's tight frown, he shrugs a brief apology for the language, and then prepares.

With a great deal of grumbling the door opens once again. As the man takes his first steps inside, letting out a gasp of astonishment at the pool of blood in the middle of the floor, Danny approaches from behind and forces the knife into one of his kidneys, paralyzing him with pain. He takes a stiff, wide-eyed step forward and then tumbles to the ground. The knife sticks inside him, and is yanked from Danny's grip, who turns just a moment too late to see the second guard rushing him from the doorway. The man slams into him in a football tackle, taking him clear off of his feet. The pair trip over the flailing body of the first guard and crash to the ground. The weight of the guard coming down on top of him drives the wind out of Danny, who desperately and unsuccessfully tries to pull air back into his lungs as the man straddling him grabs his head and whacks it off the concrete floor.

Even in his dazed condition, Danny can tell that the man is all brute strength and no technique. He reaches down and seizes the soft flesh in the groin, using all his strength to crush and twist what he finds there. The man howls in pain and rises up to smash back down, giving Danny the opportunity to pivot and drive his bodyweight sideways. Deftly, he bars one of the guard's arms and allows the momentum of them crashing back to the ground to snap the elbow in the wrong direction with a sickening

crunch. Not wasting a second, he uses the leverage of the broken arm to drive the guard face-first into the concrete, hoisting himself up and pinning the man with a knee while unholstering his pistol and flipping it around to smash the butt of it into the base of his skull until the man stops moving.

Straining to breathe in fits and starts, he dizzily stands up and notices the first guard, rolled onto his side and clutching at his back in an attempt to remove the knife. Danny places a boot on the side of the man's neck and yanks the blade out for him, only to kick him over and drive it straight into his heart.

Retrieving the keys from the belt at the man's waist, Danny woozily unshackles April. "Alright Clint, I've got April. Have you got a location for me?"

Colter just went into a building at the North end of the complex. Looks like a farmhouse, you can't miss it. If you stick to the shadows around the perimeter buildings, you can probably make it there without being spotted. If I had to guess, I'd say Emily is being kept on the second floor, but there are a bunch of signatures inside. Be careful."

"On my way."

Danny looks over to see April scooping up the shotgun. "I'm coming with you."

"Don't have time to argue, even if I wanted to. Stick close, don't shoot unless you have to."

The two of them slip out the back window and dash from shadow to shadow, following Clint's directions around the base until the farmhouse comes into view. For a moment, Danny considers going in hard and fast, but not knowing what's inside he decides it's too big of a risk, especially with the way his vision is occasionally swimming after that crack to his skull. Finding their way to the back of the house, Danny spots an entry point. The back porch has a low roof with a wooden lattice running up to it that still holds the withered remains of a rosebush climbing up it. "April, I don't think that lattice will hold my weight. Can you climb up and get a look in those windows up there?"

"No problem." She slings the shotgun over her shoulder by its strap and carefully climbs the delicate lattice, which creaks dangerously under even her small frame. When she disappears over the top, Danny crouches into the shadows and presses his fingers to his throbbing temples. A moment later April leans her head back over the edge. "Danny!" she whispers, prompting him to pop back up into view. "She's here, but she's tied up, I need that knife!" Nodding, he pulls out the knife and holds it gently, but firmly by the point. Even then it's slightly too far up to get it to April, so he grasps the lattice and hoists himself up a foot or so until she grasps the handle. Just before he releases his weight, he hears a terrifying crack, and a section of lattice tears away in his hand, causing him to crash noisily back to the ground. Meeting April's panicked eyes, he mouths, "GO!", and desperately searches for a place to hide.

Scrambling, he dives behind a pile of chopped firewood just as the porch light flicks on and Colter steps out, his eyes searching the darkness. For a moment, Danny thinks he'll go back in, but then he exits fully and clicks on a flashlight, scanning the area.

Walking carefully around the back of the house, Danny knows that it's only a matter of time before he comes across the broken lattice and raises an alarm. Wishing he still had his knife, he prepares to rush the large man in a desperate attempt to take him down quietly, when his eyes alight upon the axe planted in the stump to his right. In a flash the tool is in his hand and he is sprinting toward Colter. When he is about ten feet away, he swings the axe up and takes a mighty leap, flying through the air with deadly intent. The movement catches Colter's eye, and he turns, startled, just in time for the gleaming head of the axe to cleave into his shoulder close to the neck, burying itself deep in his chest. The man staggers back from the force of the blow and drops to his knees, but too late Danny notices the revolver being drawn from its holster. As Colter slumps to the ground, his finger finds the trigger and he lets off one final, wild shot that rings out into the darkness. Danny's face falls in dismay as voices from inside stir.

Clint's panicked voice suddenly rings out in his ear. "Mr. Finn, we've got a problem."

"Tell me about it," he complains in a barely audible whisper.

"No, it's not that. I'm so sorry, I totally forgot"

"What, what is it Clint?"

"It's my implant! I never should have activated it again!"

"Why? What's going on?"

"They found us, Mr. Finn! God, I must have lit up like a beacon. I just got an alert, the army tracked me. We've got to get out of here, there are strike drones inbound, they'll be here any minute!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Washington D.C.

Samar Behi

Samar peeks through the slats of the grille covering the ventilation shaft he has spent the last two hours crouched inside. While the sun was up, he didn't dare set foot outside for more than a few moments. Drones dot the skies, creating a nearly impassible net of scanning cameras that can easily identify a face from a hundred paces. For a while the sewers had provided a safe haven, but he wasn't familiar with their dark, twisting passageways, and more than once found himself almost hopelessly lost. In addition, as the day wore on he had increasingly been forced to hide from a human element he hadn't expected to encounter below the streets. The flurry of subterranean activity, along with his inability to maintain his directional sense, had eventually convinced him to abandon the relative safety of the dank tunnels.

With his familiar rooftop passageways far too exposed for the secrecy he desperately needs, he's made what progress he could across the city by travelling through a patchwork of broken buildings and alleyways, clinging perilously to the undersides of various garbage and delivery trucks, and clambering carefully within drafty ventilation shafts. This most recent shaft perpetually blows a cold, stale breeze that has left him shivering uncontrollably in his sewer-water-and-sweat-damp clothes. But his exit opens into a particularly exposed alley, and so he bides his time cramped behind the metal grille cover as the shadows gather outside.

He knows he is close, and his exhausted, aching body begs him to either make a break for his destination or succumb to the sweet embrace of sleep. He's fairly certain, though, that either choice leads to almost certain death, and so he has clung to the promise he made to Bertie, allowing his fierce love for the old man to sustain him until this, the moment he has been waiting for. The sun's final glow fades in the sky far above, and Samar double-checks the strap of Bertie's digital watch on his bicep - the only place he found that he can comfortably secure it, before slipping his shaking fingers through the steel slats and pushing firmly to dislodge the friction-fit cover.

He winces as the cold metal bites into his skin, prompting a crimson stain to bloom on the grey metal where it meets his hand, but his grip remains resolute. When he's sure no one heard the clamour, he perches at the edge of his hiding place, making one last visual scan for any drones before hauling himself fully out and dropping as quietly as possible to the ground below.

As he lands, his battered and stiff joints scream out in pain, but he has no time to comfort them, instead driving them reluctantly back into motion to dash across to the shadows behind a dumpster on the opposite wall. Weak as he feels, he somehow finds the strength to climb up and grab the bottom rung of the dangling ladder. Scrambling up as fast as his bleeding fingers will allow, he makes his way to the eighth floor. Reaching

the familiar window, he sees that the lock is engaged, and knocks hurriedly on the pane of glass.

The small living room inside looks dark, and he glances around nervously, pulling his coat up as high as it will go to shield his face from prying eyes while he waits. Hearing movement inside, he bangs more insistently, rattling the frame. There's a murmur of hushed voices from inside, then a span of painstaking silence before a familiar face glances furtively around the corner of the adjacent hallway.

Amie's eyes go wide in surprise, seeing his obvious panic as he waves her over, she trips the lock and flings the window open, allowing him to tumble inside.

"Samar! What are you doing here?" she asks in shock. Slamming his back against the wall, Samar hisses at her to close the curtains. Once the shabby fabric has been pulled across the opening, he flings himself at her, grasping her in a frantic hug. She recoils as his arms circle her. Stretching her face away, she retches slightly. Realizing how bad he must smell, the emotion of the day's events catches up to Samar and he barely stifles an anguished cry as hot tears begin streaming down his face.

"Hey now, it's okay, I'm here, I'm here buddy," she coos softly as she strokes his matted hair.

Amie's boyfriend, Grant, rounds the corner with a cautious, inquisitive expression. Amie looks back at him and, just as puzzled, gives a small shrug as Samar buries his weeping face in her side. Chewing on his lower lip, Grant gives her an impatient look that she immediately shuts down with a glare. He raises his hands in defense and gives a small huff before stomping back down the hallway. Amie gives Samar a tight squeeze, and then gently peels him away so she can look at him.

"Hey, Samar, what's going on, you know you can trust me?"

Trembling, Samar looks up at her with pitiful eyes, nearly breaking down again. But he pulls himself together with a shaky breath and wipes his tears away. Hearing Amie's gasp, he looks up with a start, and when he sees the look of horror she is wearing, he realizes that he has just wiped dark, bloody stains over his cheeks. She sits him down on the threadbare couch that dominates the room and squeezes his shoulders. "Sit right there, sweetheart. We've got to get you cleaned up. I'll be right back," she reassures him, before dashing out of the room.

Sitting alone, Samar feels the panic start to rise back up inside him. Before it can reach critical mass, Amie is back, her warm hands tenderly taking his own frozen, bloody ones and cleaning them with an antiseptic wipe. The sting of the solution on the wipe brings a dulled part of his mind back into focus. Stilling her hands as they fuss over him, he makes eye contact. "Amie, I need your help."

"Yeah, I can see that, Samar. You wanna tell me what's going on?"

"They're after me, Amie. I barely got away." He glances nervously at the window. "I didn't want to put you in danger, but I...I didn't have anywhere else to go."

"Who's after you?" she asks.

"Who? Everyone," he starts, pausing to wince as she begins to bandage the cuts on his hands. "There's this woman - she's a monster - she killed Raoul and his family."

"Wait, what? Who killed Raoul? Samar, you're not making any sense."

"Just listen, please! They were coming for Bertie. They...they got him, but I got away, but they're coming for me. I went to the rebels, but it wasn't safe-"

"The rebels!? Samar, what were you thinking? The rebels are dangerous!"

"I know that! I didn't have a choice, I promised Bertie!"

"Promised him what?"

Samar nearly blurts out the whole story but catches himself at the last second. "I...I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"I'm sorry, it's part of the promise. I can't tell you why, but I need you to trust me."

Grant calls from down the hall, "Amie! Come on, we've gotta go!" Amie looks up, concerned, and then turns back.

"Samar, look, this isn't a great time," she starts to explain.

"What? Where are you going?" Samar asks, desperation creeping into his voice. When she hesitates, he presses her. "Amie, I don't have anywhere else to go. I need you!"

"Samar, look, it's not that simple. You won't be very safe with us."

Samar nearly laughs out loud. "Safe!? Aren't you listening to me? I'm being *hunted*. Wherever you're going, I'll be safer with you than I am on my own," he searches her uncertain gaze, "Amie, please."

Finally, she breaks. "Okay, listen. Remember when we talked about that group that Grant and I were getting involved with? The secret one that would get us out of here one day? Well, today's that day. We've got one last thing we've got to do, and then they're going to finally take us with them."

Samar's brain whirs at a million miles an hour, oscillating wildly between hope and despair. Perhaps if he were more rested, he would be thinking more positively, but in his current shape he veers steeply toward despair. "You were just gonna leave? Without even saying goodbye!?"

She reels back at his sudden outburst. "Jesus, Samar. I'm sorry, okay? It's secret! I'm not allowed to talk about it!"

Amie's expression changes to an unfamiliar angry one. "For Chrissakes Samar, this isn't some game. You burst in here raving about god knows what but can't tell me 'cause it's a secret, and then I'm the bad guy 'casue I'm trying to make a difference in the world? God, you're such a kid sometimes!"

The words burn into Samar, moreso because he can hear the truth in them. *What right do I have to be mad at her? We're both keeping secrets.* Amie starts to storm out of the room, when suddenly, an answer pops into Samar's head. *Ohmygod. Of course! The secret society, The Free World! They'll know what to do with the device!*

"Wait!! Please! You're right!" Amie pauses at the edge of the hall but doesn't turn back. "I'm sorry, you're right. But the people you're going to, I think they can help. Bertie gave me something, something really important. He wanted me to take it to the rebels, but...your group, maybe it's better if it goes to them!"

"What is it?" she asks, turning halfway toward him. Samar screws his face up, not certain of what is safe to say. *Come on Samar, he thinks, this is Amie. If you can't trust her, who CAN you trust?* Realizing how slim his options are, he makes his decision.

"It's an antidote device. For the satellites. Whoever has it can get them back online. Bertie said that I have to make sure the government doesn't get its hands on it, or it's all over."

Amie stares at Samar for a full minute while she processes this information. "You're being serious, aren't you?"

"Cross my heart, hope to die."

"Oh man," she says, and then leans down the hall. "Grant! Change of plans!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Samar Behi

Samar is absolutely swimming inside of Grant's enormous hoodie. It stinks of his sweat, but with the strings of the hood pulled tight, he's pretty sure that no one is going to recognize him. It had taken some convincing to get Grant on board with the plan, but once Amie and Samar had explained everything, he got a strange glint in his eyes and agreed that Samar would come with them. The look had made Samar a tiny bit nervous, but Grant had always made him feel that way, so it wasn't super surprising. He guesses that Grant is eager to take some of the credit for bringing the antidote device to The Free World. Samar doesn't care. He isn't doing it for the credit, he's doing it for Bertie, and because it's the right thing to do. Grant can take all the credit he wants. Assuming they make it there alive.

Getting out of The Heights takes a few hours but is easier than Samar had expected. Grant takes them through a series of underground tunnels, seeming far more confident of where he's going than Samar had previously. *I guess Grant's not all bad*, he muses, *just wait 'till I'm older though, buddy, then we'll see who she likes better*. When they finally emerge from the tunnels, Grant turns back to them, giving a reassuring smile. "Okay, now we've just got to get to the meeting spot. Samar, when we get there, you'll meet our leader. You'll like her, I promise."

Samar smirks inwardly. Grant doesn't know that he already knows Vanessa. *I can't wait to see the look on his dumb face when he realizes that I've known their secret this whole time*, he thinks excitedly. "So, she'll get us out of here?"

"Well, not right away. We've got a mission first, but if you stick with her, I guarantee she'll keep you safe. She's the one you can give the device to, okay?"

"Okay, Grant. What do you guys have to do?" Samar asks.

Grant frowns, and Amie smacks him lightly with the back of her hand before taking over the conversation. "Come on, Grant. Samar put his trust in us." She kneels down so that she is eye-level with Samar. "We've got a message we've got to broadcast, but to make sure it gets out to everyone, we have to get in somewhere kind of dangerous."

"Where?"

"I know it sounds a little scary, but we've got to get inside the Pentagon."

Samar's jaw drops in shock. "Amie, tell me you're joking."

"Afraid not. But don't worry about us. Our group has a lot of experience doing this sort of thing. We'll be in and out."

A thunderous boom echoes in the near distance. Amie looks up at Grant quizzically. "We're not late, are we?"

"No..." Grant answers, clearly agitated. "I think we better get moving."

The three of them start rushing toward the meeting point, the alarming sounds of a battle starting to rise as they make their way across the city. The sky is beginning to

purple as dawn approaches, and occasionally through gaps in the buildings they can see large plumes of smoke. "Grant, what the hell is going on?" Amie yells as another explosion rings out from a different direction.

"I don't know! Stick close!"

From a nearby side street, a troop of well-armed soldiers bursts onto the road, prompting Grant to pull Amie and Samar into the dark entryway of a building until the way forward is clear again.

"Goddamnit!" Grant spits. "Those looked like rebels, what the hell do they think they're up to?"

"Does it matter? The plan doesn't change," Amie retorts. "We're nearly there, I think I see some of our guys up ahead!"

The sighting of familiar figures in the distance gives the trio the burst of adrenaline they need to spur them on. With his face tightly concealed in the hoodie, Samar only has a tiny window of vision, and so as they run, he fixes his sights on Amie, determined not to get separated now. As they get close, Grant suddenly skids to a halt.

"Shit!" Grant shouts, "Nearly forgot, time to mask up, babe."

"Right!" Amie replies, "Good call, close one." Grant slings his backpack down, unzipping it and starting to rummage around inside.

"Amie?" Samar calls out, "What's going on?"

"Don't worry, we only have the two masks, but it's okay, we can vouch for you."

"What mas-" Samar stops mid-question as Grant leans over, handing Amie a full, white facemask, with a bright green 'X' embossed on the front of it. His heart plummets into his stomach, and his world spins slightly. Stammering, he tries to find his voice again, "A...Am...Amie, w-what are you doing with that?"

"This is the group I was telling you about, Samar. GreenPlanetX. They're going to save the world - *We* are going to save the world." Amie says with a smile, pulling the mask over her face.

"No...no, Amie, what are you talking about!? GreenPlanetX are *murderers*!! They sent that psycho after me and Bertie! They killed Raoul!!"

"Samar, what are you saying? No, you're mistaken -"

"No, I'm NOT! I thought you were with The Free World!!"

"The Free World? Samar, what is that? Look, everything is okay!"

Samar starts to back away from her, panic starting to take back over. *How could I have been so stupid*, he thinks, *Oh God, I've got to get out of here befo-*

His line of thought is cut off as he backs up into the solid legs of someone behind him.

"Well, well, look what cat dragged in."

The thick Russian accent turns Samar's blood to ice, and his mouth contorts into a silent scream as he turns to see the towering form of Zasha Ivanov directly behind him.

His legs and arms turn to lead in sheer terror as she leans down to him and pulls his hood back. "Good to see you, Samar. I believe you have something I am looking for."

Operating on pure survival instinct, Samar sinks his teeth into the forearm of one of the hands gripping him as hard as he can. Zasha grunts in surprise and releases as Samar twists and attempts to escape. Zasha's remaining hand clamps quickly onto the fabric of the hoodie, causing Samar to jerk like a ragdoll, but the ice in his veins melts as he is shot full of pure adrenaline. He pulls his limbs in close, slipping out of the hoodie, and Zasha's grasp, like a gecko shedding its tail. He barely registers Amie's frantic shouts for him to stop and come back as once again he finds himself sprinting for some form of escape.

"I'll get the boy!" Zasha barks, "You complete the mission!" Before she finishes speaking, she is already in motion. Between furtive glances shot over his shoulder, Samar can see her following his small form into the night. Destination is no longer something that he is thinking about, there is only one directive - *run*. Everything else he can figure out later, but for now he needs to focus on getting as far away from Zasha as he can. He hurtles through the streets as chaos erupts all around him. Nowhere feels safe, gunfire and explosions are coming from every direction, and so he randomly throws himself around corners and down various streets and alleyways. His lungs burn, and even the adrenaline can only hide so much of the aching state of his battered and worn-out body. Tears stream down his face and his breaths come in ragged gasps as his mind tries to grapple with what has just happened.

How could Amie join with those terrible people? Why did I just assume I knew what she was talking about all these years? Stupid, Samar, you're so STUPID! Everyone is gone, you've got nowhere left to go, and it's all your fault! You deserve to be caught and killed by that psychopath!

He can hear Zasha's feet pounding not far behind him. Seeing a group of soldiers marching down the street, he darts directly through the group, hoping to use his tiny frame to his advantage. Shouts of anger go up from the troop as he crashes into more than one of their stout frames. He can't tell if they are army or rebel soldiers, and he isn't sure if it even matters anymore. He cries out in fear, "Someone help me, please! That woman is trying to kill me!" He doesn't stop to see if any of them raise a hand to help, but from the high-pitched squeal of a man in horrible pain followed by a burst of gunfire, he's hopeful that even if it didn't solve his problem it bought him a moment or two. Skidding on the pavement and nearly losing his balance, he hurls himself down a narrow alleyway, only to discover in horror that it is a dead end. Frantically looking around for an exit or a hiding place, he tugs desperately at a locked door before spotting a heap of garbage.

Flinging himself deep into the pile, he throws as much refuse on top of him as he can, freezing as he spots the silhouette of a person entering the alley through a tiny gap. The person stalks forward, turning their head back and forth, clearly searching the

apparently empty passageway. When the voice calls out, he is momentarily flooded with relief.

"Samar!" Grant calls breathlessly into the darkness. "Kid, you in here? Amie sent me to come get you. Listen, it's okay, you'll be safe, I promise!" As much as Samar intensely wishes that were true, he remains silent as Grant takes another step or two into the alley, leaning a hand against a wall as he struggles to catch his breath, reminding Samar to quiet his own wheezing lungs. "Samar, I know you're here buddy, I saw you come down this way."

"This is good to know."

Zasha's terrifyingly steady voice echoes off the brick walls, and Samar feels his heart squeeze as he hears her pistol's hammer being cocked. A stunned Grant slowly raises his hands, the barrel of the gun pushing into the back of his skull. "So, this is...friend of yours, Samar?" she calls out. Moving the fraction of an inch it takes to adjust his view, Samar sees that she is covered in blood spatter, and guilt washes over him for the soldiers he must have brought to an untimely end. "Is simple, Samar," she continues, "come out now, and everyone live. Happy day." Her voice takes a harder edge and Grant whimpers slightly as she pushes the pistol harder against his head. "But I tire of this game. Make me wait, your friend here pays price, da? I give to count of three. One."

Samar has no doubt that she is deadly serious, and his mind races for some way out of this predicament. *I can't! I can't give her the device! I can't jeopardize everything just to save Grant!*

"Two."

"Samar! Come on man!" Grant pleads.

It's just Grant, I don't even LIKE Grant! Ohgodohgodohgod, what do I do!?!?!?

"Three."

"STOP!" Samar screams. As much as he wishes Grant would disappear, he can't just watch him die, and he can't bear what it would do to Amie if he never came back. He stumbles out of the pile of garbage. "Please! He's got nothing to do with this, just let him go!"

Zasha smirks. "Perhaps you are smarter than you look, Samar," she says, roughly shoving Grant out of the way. "I gave you an order. Disobey me again and I won't give you a count, da?" she growls at him. Grant gives Samar a pathetic look before nodding and shambling out of the alleyway. "Nowhere left to run, little mouse. I do not like killing children, but I will break this rule if you do not hand over the device right now."

Samar reaches gingerly inside his coat pocket and reluctantly removes the small package concealed inside. Zasha impatiently waves him over, and with downcast eyes he takes his final steps toward failure. He feels an anguished pang of despair as she lifts the package from his hand.

"Such a small thing. Do not cry, little mouse, it will be put to good use," she mumbles in wonderment. As she begins to pry open the bundle, Samar's eyes are pulled toward the brightening sky as an incredible roar begins to fill his ears. A moment later, Zasha's eyes also flick upward in concern, just in time for the world around them to erupt as two fighter jets scream past their location and a nearby skyscraper is struck with two enormous explosions. Their faces both fall as the building's supports are engulfed in devastating fireballs and the entire structure lurches terrifyingly in their direction.

Perhaps after being on the run for so long, he is starting to become numb to new, horrifying developments, because Samar's brain snaps into action first. He stomps his heel down as hard as he can on the top of Zasha's foot as she gazes upward at the falling building, ripping the package from her hands and bolting for the exit of the alley. Zasha screams after him, and suddenly the two find themselves back in the middle of their cat and mouse pursuit, this time as debris, smoke, and fire rain down all around them. The shadow of the falling building blots out the sky, and soon neither of them can see more than a foot or two in front of their faces. Dodging chunks of concrete, steel, and shattered glass, Samar desperately pushes himself well past every limit he thought he had. The smoke all around him fills his lungs and chokes him, but he plants foot after foot, hurling himself toward the faint patch of morning light he can see breaking through the destruction until the darkness becomes complete. He is flung to the ground and with a terrible roar, the building completes its fall.

He isn't sure how long he lies there, barely able to breathe, but eventually something inside him stirs. Coughing violently, he pushes remnants of the collapsed skyscraper off himself and struggles to his feet. With the device tucked tightly against his chest, he stumbles forward. Hot tears sting his eyes, pushing the congealed dust out of the way. Blinking furiously, he makes out the blurry outline of someone not too far ahead of him. Unable to produce any sounds from his dust-coated throat, he pushes onward, falling to his knees at the feet of the figure. Looking up at the person before him, his determination finally gives out. He hangs his head, crestfallen, as the looming figure of Zasha Ivanov levels her pistol at him. She spits out a mass of blood and dust, and then croaks out what Samar fully expects to be the final words he ever hears, "End of the line, little mouse."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Terry Myson

Terry fusses with the chin strap of the bulky military helmet he's wearing. It's uncomfortable, and he fights the urge to tear it from his head, but without an implant, the helmet's internal circuitry and attached eyepiece give him the Network access necessary to stay in contact with his troops as the moving parts of his plan unfold. Every Cyke soldier in his ranks has been fitted with a similar helmet, liberated from Rueger's stores, creating a solidified internal network. The equipment and arms they now have access to gives Terry just enough hope to believe that their attack might be successful.

"LaToya, how we doin'?" he says into the imbedded microphone. From back at their makeshift headquarters in Manny's office atop Rueger Arms, LaToya's voice crackles into his ear.

"Beta, Gamma, and Delta squadrons are set to go. Omega squadron is still getting into flanking position."

"Damn. We can't wait for them much longer, do we have an ETA?"

"Commander Ryland says he's trying to stay off the radar, which is causing some delays. But he seems pretty confident they'll be there when they're needed."

"I don't like it, but beggars can't be choosers. We're all set here at Alpha squadron. Keep me updated LaToya."

"Will do. And Terry? Be careful out there."

LaToya cuts the transmission before Terry has a chance to respond. He knows LaToya doesn't go in for too much of the mushy stuff, so her concern catches him slightly off guard. He shuffles back up to where Sean is crouched at the concealed tunnel entrance, keeping an eye on the empty street outside. As Terry kneels beside him, Sean affectionately reaches over and gives his leg a squeeze.

"We all set?" Sean says, keeping his voice low enough not to travel to the soldiers stationed behind them.

"Nearly. Omega is a bit delayed, but other than that, looks like we're all in position. LaToya's getting a little sentimental," Terry responds with a quiet chuckle. Sean frowns slightly.

"I don't blame her. I don't know why you wouldn't stay at the command centre."

"Sean, we've been over this. I'm not asking anyone to risk their lives while I sit pretty in some ivory tower. That's the sort of thing that got this country in this mess to begin with. LaToya has communications well in hand. My place is with my soldiers. I need to be on the ground to respond to any changing conditions."

"It's the sort of thing that could get you killed, and where will your soldiers be if you get your head blown off and aren't around to lead them anymore?"

Terry smiles and leans his shoulder into Sean's. "Well, if that happens, I guess it's a good thing I've got such damn fine second-in-command."

"Don't think flattery is gonna get you off the hook, mister," Sean replies, nudging Terry back.

After carefully laying out their battle plan over the course of the previous day, it's taken most of the night to maneuver everyone into position without raising any alarms. While their headquarters and a lot of the surrounding areas had to be abandoned after Denzil's betrayal, most of the tunnel and sewer systems they use for travelling the city unaccosted were still thankfully clear. That, the cover of darkness, and LaToya's backdoor access into patrolling drone positions has allowed them to place their squadrons strategically around the city. The plan is simple enough: satellite squadrons Beta, Gamma, and Delta will attack weapons caches to draw military forces away from the primary target, and then Omega squadron will flank and capture a drone command vehicle. Through a remote plugin, LaToya will attempt to gain access to the Pentagon's security protocol, hopefully giving her the ability to cut their defensive drones off and open the heavy blast doors, as Terry leads the bulk of their forces in a direct assault. It's a bit of a 'Hail Mary' pass, but Terry knows they won't get a better opportunity, especially when they don't know how much info Denzil has fed the army over the years. Seeing the slight brightening of the black sky, Terry knows it's now or never.

"Alright LaToya," he says, activating his comm system, "time to light this firecracker."

"You got it boss," she replies, and almost immediately an explosion rocks the horizon, followed by several more. Flicking through channels using a touchpad inside his wrist, Terry monitors the progress of the squadrons as they launch a devastating attack on their targets.

After a few tense minutes, LaToya's voice crackles to life again. "They're taking the bait, Terry! Looks like two full units responding to each cache. Not quite as many as we hoped would be pulled, but with the artillery we scavenged from Rueger, it should be enough for you to make your approach. Sit tight and I'll let you know when they're too far to be recalled in a hurry."

Sighing a quiet prayer of gratitude, Terry opens a channel to Alpha squadron. "Listen up! The mission is a go! Lock and load, soldiers, and wait for my signal!

"LaToya, talk to me! When can we expect some relief from these drones?!" Terry screams into his comm as he takes cover, slamming his back against a nearby car. Alpha squadron continues its charge toward the Pentagon from three directions, but wave after wave of drones are being released from the building's fortifications, and soldiers are being cut down faster than Terry had anticipated.

"We lost the infiltration team from Omega! I don't know what happened, they were en route to flank a drone carrier and they came under attack!" LaToya relays.

"Who the hell knew they were there??"

"Beats me, but you need to hold on for another minute until they can get another team to that carrier."

Terry curses loudly and scans the battlefield ahead. It's a direct line across the south end of Arlington National Cemetery, the most exposed of their vectors of approach. Signaling Sean, the two of them desperately shout orders at the fragmenting ranks of soldiers, attempting to get some artillery lined up. *I should have run more drills,* Terry realizes, *most of these people have never set foot on an actual battlefield. I should have anticipated that they'd get overwhelmed.* Snapping himself out of his morbid thought pattern, he gives the signal for the barrage to fire, and several EMP rockets soar towards the encroaching drones. The dull thuds that follow the impacts drop large segments of drones from the sky, but it's not having the kind of effect that they need to drive forward. "Not the drones themselves!" Terry screams over the comms to his commanding officers, "Aim for the command vehicles!"

Gathering his wits, Terry formulates a plan. Striding confidently forward, he spurs his people to action.

"Shields forward!" he commands, and groups of soldiers heave massive ballistic barriers up to the front line. "Alright! Artillery, concentrate firepower to punch holes for our EMPs. Rocket launchers, aim high and on my signal, take out those trucks!"

He stares straight ahead as the next wave of drones approaches, the ground just a few feet in front of him starting to jump and fracture with bullet holes. He steels himself and waits, searching for the window they need. At the last possible second, he sees it, giving the signal for the EMP rockets to be fired. Sean slams into Terry, knocking him behind one of the barriers as the ground he was standing on erupts in a hail of bullets.

"Jesus, Terry! What the hell were you thinking?" Sean admonishes, his eyes wide with panic. "Are you hit?"

"I'm fine, Sean," he says, waving away the concern as he traces the arc of the rockets overhead. One or two strike errant drones, exploding early, but the concentrated wave breaks past the mass of machines, striking the area around the command vehicles. A cheer goes up as the majority of the drones in the air ahead spin wildly out of control, dropping from the sky like swatted flies. Terry knows there's not a second to waste. "GO, GO, GO! All units press forward!!"

With a battle cry, Terry sprints from behind cover with Sean close on his heels, leading the charge forward. He fires wildly at the remaining drones, weaving his way through the gravestones of military heroes from ages past. As they run, Terry sees a line of troop transports break out from behind some service buildings, accompanied by one drone command vehicle. "LaToya! Give me some good news!" he pleads.

"Omega squadron is back in position, I should be getting access any minu-" She breaks off suddenly, and then squawks in again, her voice deadly serious. "Terry, they have air support inbound, fighters in formation, approaching fast!"

Signaling a rapid halt, Terry screams for his men to take cover. They duck down behind what protection they can find. "Surface-to-air units, get ready!" he orders, and from the rear he can see rebels quickly relaying the required weaponry forward.

Crouching low, he scans the morning skies - as blood red as the ground they've covered so far - keeping an eye on the new wave of forces being readied ahead. Almost without warning, the fighters scream through the air above and missiles are fired haphazardly. The jets break formation and most of the missiles fail to find a target. Only one jet is struck on its left wing, causing it to spin wildly, its pilot ejecting shortly before the whole plane erupts in a fireball, raining destruction below it. Terry sends orders to prepare for the fighters circling back, but the roar of their engines fades slightly. After a moment, he hears several massive explosions, and sees plumes of smoke billow up in the distance.

"Oh shit," LaToya says into Terry's ear, "Terry, they....they just took out a building. Terry they just dropped a fucking *residential building* right on top of Omega squadron!"

"You've got to be fucking kidding me. Are you telling me you're not plugged in?"

"I'm telling you there's no one left to plug me in, Terry! Omega's down...and... god, Terry, all those people! How could they do that?"

"There's time for that later, LaToya, I need you to focus. How do we get in?"

"Terry, if I can't get access to a functioning command vehicle, there's nothing I can do from here."

Terry's eyes dart around as his mind tries to grasp onto a semblance of a new plan. *If LaToya can't bring down the blast doors, then it won't matter how much firepower we've brought, we'll never breach the outer defenses.* He opens a wide communication channel.

"All units, listen up! We have a new objective. Primary target is now any functioning drone command vehicle. Do not, I repeat do NOT fire EMP rounds at DCVs, we need the circuits inside uncooked, is that clear?" He receives affirmative messages from his commanding officers, and then grabs Sean. "Listen to me, Sean. We've only got one chance here. I've got to make it to the DCV over there. I need you to lead the charge and draw the attention forward while I break wide and circle around. You got me?"

Sean looks darkly at the assembled military forces ahead. For a second Terry is sure he is about to argue against the plan, but then his face takes on a stern expression. He takes a stiff breath and nods, "Aye, Commander." The cold way Sean's reply hits Terry causes a momentary pang of emotion, but he knows that it isn't a slight, it's his second-in-command that has his back.

With a massive battle cry, Sean surges forward with the troops while Terry dashes south, trying to stay out of sight. As the sounds of heated battle erupt north of him, he sprints down and around the service buildings ahead, using them as a visual shield. Coming around a corner, he spots a rear guard and power slides feet-first behind a truck, hurling an explosive grenade between the tires and through to the other side. Waiting a half second after detonation, he swings up rifle-first, putting a few bullets into the men writhing on the ground. Slamming a new magazine into his gun, he pushes forward through the clearing smoke. Sticking close to the walls of the service buildings, he makes his way behind where the troop transports drove through to form their

defensive line, spotting the DCV parked a bit further back. From what he can see, all the vehicle's drones have been deployed, and knowing how exposed his rebels are he throws caution to the wind, making a direct break for it.

The sudden burst of movement catches the attention of a few nearby soldiers, but Terry cuts them down as he runs, emptying his rifle. Tossing it aside, he crosses the last stretch at a dead run. He doesn't slow as he approaches the armored vehicle, allowing his momentum to carry him behind its bulky frame before skidding to a halt. Drawing his sidearm, he takes three quick breaths and spins around the back, yanking the rear door open.

The impact of the bullets fired at him barely registers, and he returns fire immediately, placing two bullets neatly into the heads of each of the soldiers perched inside. It's not until he has leaped in and heaved the metal door closed behind him that he pauses to make a quick assessment of his condition. His body armour appears to have taken the brunt of the attack, but dark, spreading stains on his left shoulder and the side of his abdomen let him know that he hasn't escaped unscathed. *Just put it out of your mind*, he cautions himself, *you have a job to do*. Gritting his teeth against the dull pain that is setting in, he moves further into the cabin filled with electronic equipment.

His ear perks up at the sound of stifled breathing toward the front. Swinging his pistol back up in the direction of the noise, he creeps forward. As he reaches the front of the compartment, a soldier cowering behind a bank of machinery comes into view. Terry points the barrel of his gun, but before he squeezes the trigger, he catches the glimpse of a terrified young face, no more than sixteen years old. He relaxes his grip slightly as the teenager shakily raises his hands in surrender. "P-please," he stammers out. *Christ almighty*, Terry thinks, *it's just a freakin' kid...*

"Okay, stop that. Fuck's sake, I'm not gonna hurt you," he sighs in frustration, reaching forward and hauling the kid to his feet. Quickly disarming him, he drags the shaking teen to the back of the truck, tossing him roughly out the door, wondering painfully how many children he's killed today.

Spinning back to the task at hand, he activates the comm channel to LaToya. "Alright, I'm in! What do I do?"

"There should be a control station somewhere nearby, I need you to connect your helmet to it. There should be a contact port; it'll look like a green circle, just place your helmet on it and I should be able to connect wirelessly."

Stumbling over to the nearest bank of equipment, Terry locates the circle LaToya mentions, yanking off his helmet and placing it down, leaving the connected earpiece wire dangling from his ear to the console. There's a momentary pause until he hears LaToya yell, "Got it! Deactivating drones!" and then he is immediately hit with a whine of feedback. Grunting at the high-pitched tone, he pulls the earpiece slightly away from his ear. "LaToya, what the hell is that noise?" he asks, noting an odd echo in his earpiece.

"Oh fuck, how did I not notice that?" LaToya responds, slightly panicked.

"What? What is it?"

"It's feedback. Oh Christ, they've got a line into our comms! That must be how they knew where Omega squadron was! Now that I'm connected, I'm picking up a subtle subroutine coming from the Pentagon's Network. It's more complex than anything I've ever seen. Ever since we came in range, they've been listening to everything we've be-...Oh shit. Oh shit, Terry, they know you're there! The fighters are circling back, get out of there! Get out of th-"

Not waiting to let LaToya finish, Terry abandons the helmet and earpiece. Rushing for the rear door he hears the sound of a jet ripping through the air overhead, and his world turns to fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sean Torres

Sean screams in rage and rams the butt of his rifle into the face of a soldier before shifting and firing three rounds into another coming at him from the left. The battlefield has erupted into chaos and it's getting harder to tell where the enemy forces end and his own begin. Knowing that every second could be the crucial one that Terry needs, he slides over to a fallen rebel who is clutching an EMP launcher. Slamming a cannister into it, he fires up and away from the DCV, knocking out a cluster of drones that had pinned some rebels behind a memorial. Reloading the launcher, he hears footsteps behind him and turns to see someone in military garb rushing him, raising a pistol. Swinging the small cannon up, he fires an EMP round directly into the face of the young soldier, whose nose bursts into a spray of blood at the blunt force trauma as he collapses, unconscious.

His helmet screen blanks out for a moment from the close detonation, but after a few clicks of the power switch it begins to flicker to life, his earpiece crackling back online. A distinct buzz closes in from above and he fumbles to ram another EMP grenade into his launcher as a drone descends onto his position, its guns spooling up to fire. In his haste, the cannister jams, and he tosses the weapon aside in frustration, reaching for the rifle slung on his shoulder even though he knows it's almost certainly too late.

Suddenly, the drone's guns droop and it pauses mid-air. *He did it!* Sean rejoices, sighing in relief as he sees drones all over the battlefield ceasing their attack. "Hell yeah!" he shouts, clicking the comm on to congratulate LaToya, only to hear her frantically yelling at Terry. Suddenly a jet shrieks low over the battle. Instinctively ducking for cover, Sean watches in horror as it flies right past the fighting, loosing its payload on the vehicles at the far end. The DCV is launched into the air as an explosion rocks the area, and Sean feels his heart clench in his chest watching the vehicle cartwheel end over end, crashing heavily onto the flaming ground.

Time slows for Sean, and he feels like he is moving through molasses. Feeling entirely disembodied, he feels himself charging toward the burning wreckage as soldiers from both sides turn and stare at the carnage the military has just wreaked upon its own people. When he reaches the fiery crater, he barely feels the waves of heat rolling over him, blurring his vision. Nor does he feel the pain as the hot metal of the warped door sizzles into the flesh of his hands while he desperately pulls. Veins pop out as he strains with every ounce of force his mountainous figure can conjure. The metal creaks and groans, shifting slowly at first before finally giving way and flinging open.

Smoke billows out from the entrance, and Sean starts to fight his way into the flaming interior. "TERRY!!" he screams, his lungs protesting at the ruined air he drags in. "TERRY!! WHERE ARE YOU!" Suddenly, he sees the slumped form of his love lying

against the now vertical ceiling of the truck. Surging forward, he hauls the body up onto his shoulder in a herculean feat of strength, and staggers back outside, collapsing onto the ground as soon as he clears the plumes of smoke and fire. Crawling closer, he drags Terry's body up into his lap. "Terry, please. Pleeeeease!!! Come on! Wake up!" he begs, shaking Terry's still form. "Wake up, you sonofabitch! Wake up!!" he screams, tears pouring down his face. Numb to the world around him, he slides Terry to the ground and begins administering CPR. Underneath his massive frame, he can feel Terry's ribs crack as he pounds into him, desperately trying to start his heart. Each round of breathing and pumping gets more and more frantic, until with a gasp, Terry miraculously opens his eyes and pulls life-giving breath into his smoke-seared lungs.

Rolling onto his side in a fit of coughing, Terry tries to heave himself up onto his elbows, collapsing weakly as Sean's enormous arms encircle him, pulling him into a tight hug. Wincing, Terry pulls away. "Oh fuck, shit," he stammers in between coughs, "Sean? A little gentler please." Sean releases his python grip slightly and stares deeply into Terry's eyes.

"I thought I lost you."

The two lose themselves in each other for a moment, until the chaos of the world around them interrupts their embrace.

Staring at the killing all around, desecrating the memorial of past sacrifices, Terry chokes back a sob. "We failed, Sean. We'll never get inside now. All this effort, all this death...Was it all for nothing?" As if in response to his plaintive cry, suddenly a sharp, piercing tone fills the air, and every soldier in the field flinches to a standstill. Gunfire and battle cries cease as everyone grasps at the pain in their ears. Just as suddenly as it began, the tone cuts out, and there is a collective gasp as everyone's viewscreens simultaneously activate.

"Uuuuuh, Terry...I think you need to see this..." Sean says carefully. He helps Terry stumble over to the corpse of one of their men, removing the helmet and handing it to his commanding officer. Terry activates the viewscreen, and draws in a sharp breath as he sees what Sean, and it would seem everyone in the vicinity, is seeing: The kneeling forms of the President and his top generals, hands bound and mouths gagged, held at gunpoint by figures in white masks painted with a vibrant, green X.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Former Southern USA

Danny Finn

The wail of sirens cuts through the pre-dawn air as Danny grabs the revolver from Colter's limp hand. The voices inside the farmhouse rise in a chorus of concern and panic, and chairs scrape the floor as figures scramble to their feet. Taking what cover he can, Danny anxiously keeps an eye on the upper windows, silently willing April and Emily to hurry. Finally, Emily's slim frame crawls out of the window and onto the porch roof. Simultaneously, one of the men rushes out of the back door, only to collapse in a heap as the bullet Danny fires rips through the side of his skull.

Up above, Emily emerges from the interior, nearly clearing the windowsill before she is violently jerked backward by a burly arm. Without hesitation, she lashes out with the knife Danny gave her, embedding the blade in tissue. Trying to keep his attention in two places at once, Danny drops another of the men that rushes out of the house with the revolver and motions for Emily to climb down. She quickly drops her bodyweight over the side, grasping the edge while her feet attempt to find purchase on the remaining pieces of trellis as they break away under the strain. Cursing under his breath, Danny races forward.

"I've got you, just let go!" he shouts. Emily immediately releases her grip on the roof as Danny closes his arms around her. The two stumble backward slightly while Danny lets her slip to the ground. Before he can fully regain his balance, another figure bursts through the screen door. The rapid shot Danny gets off wings the large man in the shoulder, sending a frantic spray of bullets from his automatic rifle in all directions. As the bullets tear through the roof above, April sprints to the edge, throwing caution to the wind and leaping clear of the structure while Danny and Emily toss themselves to the ground.

April lands in a heap, rolling awkwardly and then yelping in pain as she tries to rise to her feet. Helping each other, the trio scramble around the side of the house just as another hail of bullets is sent in their direction from the group of men who continue to stream out of the farmhouse.

"I've got you in my sights," Clint reassures them over the comm, "but those strike drones are closing fast. Once they get here, you can expect them to light this place up like a

Christmas tree. It's standard procedure to use a scorched earth policy on bases like this. I'll cover you as long as I can!"

For the first time, Danny gets a good look at the state Emily is in, the colour draining from his face as he notices the red and black that now dominates hers.

"We've got to get Robbie!" she slurs through split and swollen lips. Danny stuffs a lid on the emotion welling up inside him, funneling the incomprehensible anger into a

laser-like focus. From behind the farmhouse, two men round the corner, each receiving a headshot from Danny's revolver before they even have a chance to aim their weapons. Tossing the empty gun aside, he draws his pistol and takes a defensive rear position as the group begins to hobble their way to the shadows of the nearest outbuilding.

Militia members emerge all over the base like hornets from an agitated nest, swarming to battle stations and weapons depots as the sirens continue to blare. The trio continues to hustle toward the shadows, but a cry rises above the din when they are spied by the men streaming from the front of the farmhouse. Danny braces himself for the incoming attack, but before he gets off a shot, the soldiers start dropping one by one, sending the rest into a panicked dash for cover.

"I told you Mr. Finn, I've got you covered, just keep moving!" crackles Clint's voice in Danny's ear.

Suddenly, the far end of the base is illuminated in a devastating fireball, and military drones scream past in the deep purple sky.

"Clint, you'd better get out of that tower before it's too late!" Danny warns. The drones make a tight circle and fly back over, strafing the compound with bullets while militia troops return fire. In all the chaos, Danny, April, and Emily make it to what limited shelter they can find.

"Alright Em, where are they keeping Robbie?" Danny shouts over the chaos. She points a cement bunker near the middle of the base.

"I watched them take him in there. I heard them say they were prepping him for surgery, Dan. We've got to get to him, what's the plan?"

"Em, you're not coming - "

"Bullshit I'm not coming! If you think I'm leaving my so-"

"Em, we don't have time to argue! You and April are too much of a liability. You've got one eye swollen shut, and neither of you can run-"

"I don't give a shit! I'm not leav-"

"Em, I'll get him!" Danny shouts, and then takes her face gingerly in his hands, lowering his voice. "I promise, I will get him, and I will bring him back. But I can't do that if I'm watching out for you two as well. Please. We'll rendezvous with Clint, get you out to the car, and then he and I will go back in, okay?"

There is a moment's hesitation where it seems Emily will protest again, but eventually she sighs and nods. As fire and fury rain down all around them, they make their way quickly back to the entry point. Before too long, the guard tower that Clint was positioned in erupts in a blast that momentarily blinds them all.

"Clint! Tell me you got out of there!" Danny calls over the link. With surprise and relief, the reply echoes both through his implant, and from the darkness just ahead as Clint sprints toward them. April breaks away from the group, hobbling as fast as her damaged ankle will allow, throwing herself full force into a tight hug with her son.

"Oh Clint, baby I'm so sorry!" she cries, clutching on to him fervently.

"No, mom, it's okay, I'm the one who's sorry!" Clint coos, hugging his mother with all the force he can muster.

Time slows to a crawl as Danny watches one of the militia soldiers round a corner behind Clint and spot the group. He feels as though his body is moving through molasses as he raises his pistol in sync with the soldier's rising rifle. Looking past Clint, April can see the danger that he is still blissfully unaware of. There isn't even time to shout a warning as she grips his shoulders and spins him around, placing herself between him and the soldier just as a single crack splits the night. The soldier drops instantly, Danny's bullet lodged in his heart. Clint releases the breath that had caught in his throat, letting his brain catch up to what just happened. He looks down and locks eyes with his mother, who smiles sweetly up at him.

"I love you so much, my boy. I'm so proud of you."

Clint hugs her once more and returns her smile, but the joy melts from his face as his hand comes away from her back wet. Confusion reigns for a moment until Danny realizes the truth of the situation. One sound. Two bullets. A freak of timing as the men fired simultaneously. April sags in Clint's arms as the blood spreads across her back, staining her shirt red.

"Oh Jesus..." Emily whispers, rushing forward to take stock of the injury. "We need to get her out of here, right now!" As if on cue, headlights cut across the group, and Neil pulls the SUV to a skidding halt beside them. Not waiting for an explanation, Danny and Emily haul April's weight into the back seat.

"I'll take care of April, get Robbie!" Emily shouts, already tearing the back of April's shirt to get access to the wound. Danny glances at the stunned Clint, locking onto his wide gaze. Clint's face contorts as he struggles to maintain composure, but without a word spoken, the two come to a mutual understanding. Vengeance is writ plain on the storm inside Clint's eyes.

"Neil!" Danny shouts, "Get them out of here! Head for the rendezvous!"

"What about you?" Neil yells back.

"We'll find our own way out of here and catch up, now go!!"

Almost before Danny is finished speaking, the tires squeal and Neil is pulling away from the madness that Clint and Danny now turn towards. Nodding to each other, the pair begin sprinting toward the central bunker, ducking and weaving around the chaos. By some miracle, they reach the bunker unharmed and, refusing to waste a second, Danny throws open the nearest door, Clint seamlessly covering the entrance as it opens. The two begin their internal sweep, searching from room to room. Danny's concern rises as they clear the first hallway with no result, and by the time the second is clear he is close to full-on panic. *Just keep moving*, his mind insists, *you're going to find him!*

It's in the third hallway that they finally encounter resistance. They round the corner, and Clint just barely yanks Danny back as a barrage of bullets peppers the wall. Waiting for the lull, the two explode back around the corner in sync, Danny staying low and Clint taking the high position to dispatch the guards neatly. Tossing his now empty pistol, Danny recovers one of the guard's rifles and rams the half-loaded magazine in the rest of the way while Clint also reloads. It's not hard to see which door the guards had been covering. Not bothering to check whether it is locked, Danny boots it open with a well-placed kick.

Inside, Danny can see Robbie's skinny frame strapped to a table, a fabric divider shielding his neck and head from view. Caught off guard by the sight, Danny rushes forward, ignoring Clint's clipped warning about clearing the room first. Before he makes it three steps forward, a figure in medical scrubs rushes from the side and plunges a scalpel into him, stabbing several times in quick succession before Clint rams the butt of his rifle into the man's face. As the man falls away, Clint unloads his clip into his body, unleashing a torrent of emotion along with the ammunition.

Danny stumbles over to the surgeon's table as Clint clears the supply closet toward the rear of the room. There is the sound of a brief struggle, followed by a few sickening thuds before Clint emerges, splattered in fresh blood. He hurries to Danny's side, fussing over the stab wounds while Danny waves him away. Turning toward the boy strapped to the table, Danny reaches forward with an unsteady hand and yanks the divider away.

The gasp of shock catches in his throat as he sees the state of his son. A metal framework appears to be bolted into his skull in several places, holding him steady. Along one side of his face a bulky implant has been hastily grafted to skin and bone, still bleeding freely along the edges. His eyes are pried open with rigid wires, and a coding matrix is beamed directly onto his retina, activating the newly implanted chip with god-knows-what programming.

"Holy mother of fuck. What the hell is this?" Clint whispers.

"It's a black-market implant procedure, but there's something else..." He circles the head of the table, unsure how to remove his boy from the tangle of wires and sensors. He rushes over to a virtual control station not unlike the ones he used at Rueger. Luckily, the console appears to be unlocked, but he is unprepared for what he discovers as he accesses the system.

"Fuck me, it's a brainwashing program!" he exclaims. Seeing what is being beamed on a loop into his son's brain, all thoughts of a delicate extraction fall away. He yanks the wires from the machine and the power source, hearing the whine of electricity die away. Rushing over to Robbie, he deftly unclips the wire framing holding open the eyes. Realizing that the structure bolted to Robbie's skull will take too long to remove, he pulls away the electrodes and connective wires while Clint undoes the straps holding

him to the table. He attempts to lift Robbie up, crying out as pain sears through the stab wounds on his side where blood now matts his clothes to his body.

"I can't lift him," he calls over to Clint, the desperation in his voice apparent.

"Don't worry, I've got him, you lead the way," Clint calls back, hoisting young Robbie into his arms, skull-cage and all.

Swallowing as much of the fatherly guilt as he can, Danny begins the process of leading them out of the building as the walls shake from repeated explosions. Taking them back the way they had come, they have to backtrack when they find their path blocked by a collapsed hallway. They stumble around turn after turn, getting completely disoriented as the building begins to come down around them, until finally Danny bursts through a door into the open expanse of a garage, lined with vehicles.

"Finally, a little luck!" Danny exclaims.

"Spoke too soon!" Clint retorts, ducking as bullets ricochet nearby, fired from guards now rushing in from the far end. "Where do you think they keep the keys?"

"Fuck keys!" Danny yells, launching himself into the nearest driver's seat and bashing the electronics console open. Clint lays Robbie down in the back and sets about strapping him down with the seatbelts.

"You sure you know what you're doing, Mr. Finn?"

"I had to hotwire my own piece of shit car often enough, I can't imagine that this," he mutters, pausing to strip a few wires with his teeth before sparking them off of each other, "can be that much different."

He gives a whoop of victory as the engine roars to life. Clint leaps into the passenger seat, and Danny slams the truck into gear, peeling out of the parking space in time to run down two of the encroaching guards. Robbie aims his rifle out of his window, taking down a few more as the truck careens into the open air, skidding around a turn and accelerating into the darkness as irate militiamen pile into their own trucks to give chase.

Peering upwards, Danny can see the military drones still circling, continuing to set the compound ablaze, although the militia has clearly mounted an impressive defence, with flaming mounds of drone scraps littering the ground. Swerving to avoid the detritus, Danny makes his way toward what appears to be an exit, but as several trucks pull in to create a blockade, Danny switches tactics. "Hold on to something!" he yells, and then yanks the wheel to the side, plowing straight through a section of outer chain-link fence.

Danny speeds away from the compound, heading west toward the rendezvous point. Behind them, the horizon splits open, bleeding pure morning light into the sky.

"We're running out of time, Mr. Finn, do you think we'll make it?"

"Em won't let them leave without us, don't worry. All we've got to do is get there," he replies. His expression darkens as he squints through the light reflecting in his rearview mirror. "But that just got a little bit more complicated. Hold on!!!" Swerving dangerously to the left, the ground just to the right of the vehicle is obliterated, causing

Clint to curl up to protect his face. "It's those goddamn drones! They're following us!" Danny yells, slamming his hand against the steering wheel.

Clint goes quiet, his eyes flitting back and forth as he considers their predicament. "Not us..." he mutters.

"What?" Danny asks, not following Clint's thought process.

"They're not following us, they're following me. It's my implant they are tracking. We're not going to make it with them tracking us like this!" Desperately, he looks around, taking in the trucks fanning out behind them, firing a near-constant barrage of bullets their way, and the drones now circling around for a strafing run. He eyes the door beside him. "Danny, you'll tell my mother that I'm sorry, won't you?" he asks, slipping his seatbelt off.

Catching Clint's meaning just in time, Danny lunges across the cab of the truck and heaves him backwards as he attempts to open the door and leap.

"Not so fast!" he grunts as Clint slams into him, swerving their trajectory just as an air-to-ground missile detonates where they had been not a moment before. "You can tell her yourself. I don't leave family behind."

Danny can see the words sear into Clint's mind, willing them to burn away his shame. "Yes, that's right Clint. You're family, and we're going to get through this together."

Clint's eyes harden as he opens the small pouch on his belt. One dose left. It would be enough.

"Alright," he responds, placing a reassuring hand on Danny's shoulder, "together then. Keep her steady if you can, I've got an idea."

With a fluid motion he springs up to standing, erupting out of the truck's sunroof and plunging the Spike's needle directly into his heart. Adrenaline floods his system, and his vision sharpens. *There's only one thing to do now*, he thinks, removing his knife from its sheath.

Back inside the truck, all Danny can make out is the motion of Clint throwing something and then his body starts to go limp.

"Clint! Get back in here!" Danny screams, pulling him back in through the sunroof. He blanches when he sees what Clint has done. Half of his face is covered in blood below the now empty socket, but even so Clint is grinning. "Take that, assholes," he murmurs, and a moment later Danny realizes what it is he threw, as the strafing drones alter course to track their target and the front line of the trucks is blown to pieces.

For a moment, Danny thinks that they might actually be in the clear, until through the smoke and destruction, several more trucks burst into view, gaining quickly.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Terry Myson

Silence hangs over the battlefield like a wet blanket, smothering the flames of chaos that burned brightly mere moments ago. Terry and Sean exchange uneasy glances as the man with the mask begins to speak with an electronically distorted voice.

"A good day to you all. I appreciate your attention. As you can see, I have here your country's president and all his top officials. It seems to me that the violence and suffering has gone on long enough, and so GreenPlanetX has stepped in as a....moderator, you could say. I would like to extend an invitation of parlay to the leader of the resistance, one Terrence Myson. If you would all be so kind as to lay down your weapons, let us begin peace talks, yes?"

As he finishes speaking, red lights flanking the blast doors at the distant edge of the Pentagon begin flashing, and the enormous barrier begins to rise. All around, soldiers from each side stare in wonderment and confusion. A small group begins to skirmish anew when the piercing screech rings out across all the devices once more, and the man on their viewscreens wags a finger back and forth.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, come now, let's not be children. Lay down your weapons and send Mr. Myson forward. It would be such a shame to kill everyone and have to start fresh, but please believe me when I say that it is neither outside of my capability, nor my resolve."

The screech cuts off, and Terry opens a wide comm line. "Do it," he urges breathlessly, "lay down your weapons. That's an order." Tearing off the helmet, Terry hauls himself to his feet. Sean is up beside him in a flash.

"You're not actually going in there with that madman, are you?" he asks incredulously.

"It doesn't look like I have much of a choice, Sean."

"Terry, they'll kill you, that's what they do!"

"Maybe. It definitely seems likely. But what are my other options? We wanted inside the Pentagon, and he just handed it to us on a silver platter. It's possible that it's just a trick to wipe out all the leadership, but then why bother with this whole charade?"

"The 'whole charade' is kind of their deal, Terry. They're probably going to stream this all over the place. I'm not going to just sit here while they murder you on livestream."

"Well then," Terry offers with a crooked smile, "I guess you'd better come along." Soldiers as far as the eye can see begin to lay down their weapons, unsure of how to proceed. Terry tries to issue them encouraging looks, attempting to look far more confident than he feels.

At the entrance to the Pentagon, they are met by six masked guards, armed with top-of-the-line weaponry. Everywhere he looks, Terry can see the panicked faces of the

building's workers. In a way, he is relieved that he didn't have to fight his way past all these people. Just regular folks who came to work today, hoping it would be like any other. *Well*, he thought, *let's see if we can offer them a new kind of hope.*

After several rides down elevators, Terry realizes that they must be deep underground. He hadn't been aware that the Pentagon even went this deep. Years ago, one of his men had come up with a plan to burrow their way into the lower levels of the government's command center. At the time it had seemed ridiculous. With how deep he feels them going, now he doubts whether they would have even been able to tunnel deep enough to reach anything important. His train of thought is cut off as the elevator they are in comes to a jolting stop, several levels below what the buttons on the control panel would suggest was possible. The doors hiss open, and the pair is unceremoniously ushered out, down a short hallway, and through a massively thick steel doorway. Sean leans over to whisper in Terry's ear.

"How the hell did they get in here? It doesn't even look like there was a struggle." He's right, Terry realizes. No dead bodies, no bloodstains, no damage to the door itself....it's as if they just waltzed in. All Terry can do is shake his head at his own naivety. *What in God's green earth did I think I was going to do once we got in here? Starve them out? I was about to get us all killed....*

With that defeating thought running through his mind, he is shown to the centre of an expansive control room, ringed by soldiers of all shapes and sizes, each face hidden behind a green and white mask. On the floor ahead are the president, his generals, and a few other notable figures, bound, gagged, and on their knees. Guns are trained on them from every angle. The man standing in front of them is dressed in a stylish business suit, mirror-shined dress shoes, black leather gloves, and the same white mask with a green X emblazoned on the front. Only, his mask also appears to be connected to a black hood that covers the rest of his head, leaving no skin or hair exposed that could possibly be used to identify him. *I suppose I don't even know if it is actually a man*, Terry thinks, although the frame of the figure would suggest as much. The leader turns to address the newcomers.

"Ah, so glad you could join us, Terry - may I call you Terry?" the electronic voice asks.

"Well, you're the one with the guns, so I guess you can call me Cupcake if it suits you," Terry sneers.

"Now now, no need for hostility, Terry. It is very much my hope that we can be friends. All of us, in fact!" he says, sweeping his arm over the gathered prisoners. "I am not here to cause unrest, but to end it. What do you say, can we all sit down and chat face-to-face?"

Unable to help himself, Sean pipes up with a sarcastic quip, "Don't you mean face-to-mask? Or do you intend to stop hiding like a coward?"

Terry lightly elbows him in the ribs to warn him to keep quiet, and the masked figure gives off a gentle laugh. "This one has spirit! Sean Torres, I presume? I understand how you feel. But just as you feel protective of your lover and captain, Terry, I must remain protective of my loved ones, and this mask affords them that protection."

Somewhat taken aback by the cavalier admission of how much he knows about them, Sean presses his lips together and shrinks ever so slightly backwards. "Alright, alright, so you know us. What should we call you?" Terry demands.

The mask tilts curiously to one side. "Hmm, interesting, I don't think anyone has ever asked that in one of our....negotiation sessions before. For now, you may call me Mr X."

"Fine then, Mr X. You have my undivided attention. What do you want?"

"What do I *want*? What I want is perfectly simple. To usher the world into a new age of equality, prosperity, and progress. I'm quite certain you are familiar with our exploits over the last few years. This world has been at a crisis point for far too long. Humanity must learn to live in harmony, or we will all be destroyed. The old ways have proven themselves to be incapable of producing this needed change." He strolls over to the bound officials, running his gloved hand over their heads before grasping one violently by the hair. "It is run by greedy, selfish people. Warmongers, who prefer to lead with exploitation, rather than justice. I looked around and saw a fractured world, ruled by petty men, hoarding the power and money they had accumulated. Enough to easily fix the world's problems, and yet day after day they refused to step up. Refused the call to healing and reconciliation. And so, I decided to answer the call myself." Turning the head of the man he holds, he loops a finger around the gag and pulls it free. "What about you, general? Would you like to answer the call alongside me?"

The fury in the general's eyes blazes. "The United States government will never negotiate with terrorists like you!" he spits.

"Pity." Mr X mutters, nodding to a nearby guard as he releases the general. Before he has taken three steps, the guard shoots the general in the head, allowing the body to flop forward into the brains splattered on the floor in front of him. There is a frenzied murmur from the rest of the group.

"Now just hold on!" Terry exclaims. "I thought we were here to *stop* the killing. At least that's *my* goal, so can we please just calm down!"

Mr X points at Terry and quickly approaches. "Yes! Yes, there he is. That's the man I thought you would be. A man dedicated to *life*." He reaches up and places a hand on either side of Terry's face, gently pulling his head down to meet his own masked forehead. As Sean tenses, Terry gestures with a hand to hold him off. "I feel that you and I are kindred spirits, Terry. We are the ones willing to do the necessary work to bring about the needed changes. The new world will not be for men like us, Terry. Like Moses in the desert, we will not enter the promised land, but if you want to, we can lead the

people there. These men before us have broken their covenant with the people. But together, we can restore balance."

"I'm nothing like you," Terry states, unsure if his voice carries the certainty he wants it to.

"Come on, Terry!" Mr X shouts, stepping to one of his guards and drawing a pistol. "You know I'm right! These men here have *betrayed* the people! They have abused their positions! They have been given every opportunity, every privilege imaginable, and they have chosen a path of destruction, death, oppression, fear, war, ignorance, and cruelty!" Each word is hurled like an epithet, "They've had their chance, Terry. They have proven themselves incapable of leading. If it were otherwise, I would not be standing here, and neither would you. So, Terry, tell me - are *you* capable of leading?" He turns the pistol around and hands it to Terry, gesturing towards the president.

Terry looks down at the gun in his hand, unsure of how to proceed. *Isn't this what you came here for? Wasn't this the goal the whole time?* He takes a step forward.

"Terry, don't," Sean whispers fiercely. "Not like this."

"Then like what, Sean? Should I hand the gun to the president first and see if he suddenly decides to start making the right choices? They've hunted us like dogs. Murdered us indiscriminately. All because we dared to stand up to the oppression they offered us."

"If you murder him, will you be any different?"

"This is what we've been fighting for all this time. One bullet and it's over, we've won..." He turns to look at Mr X. "But if I did this, wouldn't I just be exchanging one dictator for another? Forced to follow your vision instead of his?"

Mr X shook his head slowly. "You misapprehend the offer, Terry. I did not come here to seize control, but to offer it. Return the power to the people. Run a kind, just, equitable society that does not abuse the planet. Give your people the power to live their lives in freedom, with

open access to healthcare, education, and resources. Restore the original ideals of democracy

and decentralize the oppressive power structures that have crippled their autonomy. We will

help you achieve these goals, with the use of force if necessary, though we prefer a...hands-off

approach. Simply pull the trigger, and this country is yours, Terry Myson."

Terry stares at the gun in his hand. "How can power obtained by murder ever be considered a base for a kind and just society? Don't get me wrong, this is absolutely

what I have wanted for so long. But killing someone in a battle for freedom is one thing. Murdering a man cowering in front of me is another. If that's the price of your new world, then I have to decline. I will not lead by fear and intimidation. I will not be your executioner."

Terry tosses the gun to the floor and the president lets out a sob of relief. For a long while no one says anything, and then Mr X begins to slowly clap.

"Bravo, Mr. Myson. Bravo. I had so hoped that you were the man of integrity my sources believed you to be, and you have proven yourself marvellously. Truly inspiring! All of you watching out there, take note! This man has fought and suffered and sacrificed for *your* freedom, and even now he will not give in to the darkness that has pervaded your leadership for all this time. Remember that he could have taken it by force, and instead, he chose mercy. GreenPlanetX will take that burden upon ourselves," a slight gesture from his hand results in one of the soldiers stepping forward and plugging two bullets in the president's body, "for the crimes of the past cannot be forgiven. But I am confident that you will lead this country back to the light, Terry. Or should I say, Mr. President?"

Terry is frozen in place, his jaw hanging slightly open. Mr X claps him gently on the back and whispers into his ear, "We're off air, good show, I knew you had it in you." He waves a sharp gesture with his left wrist, and his entire entourage marches out of the room; he leans in closer to whisper a secret to Terry. "It's important that I introduce you to someone. His name is Noah Levi, from The Free World - our motives are aligned to his - and he will help you rebuild a new society with a new mindset - I strongly insist you follow his advice - I will be in touch," and with that, he turned on his heels and left; leaving Terry and Sean standing amongst the taped up generals of the former president of the United States; and the former president's lifeless body.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Vanessa Hemp

"Where are you?" Vanessa whispers to herself, checking her watch impatiently. The Finns should have arrived more than an hour ago, as the sun rises on the abandoned airfield she knows that she can't wait much longer. The flight crew is impatient to get in the air. The longer they stay here, especially in daylight, the greater the chances that they will be discovered. She is just about to give up her search of the horizon when her eye catches a cloud of dust in the distance. She calls over to one of the crew members for a pair of binoculars. She spots a silver-coloured vehicle racing across the desert landscape. It's kicking up a fair amount of dust on its own, but further behind it is a much larger cloud rising up. A far away explosion lights the cloud from the inside, and Vanessa kicks into action.

"Alright, let's get the plane prepped for takeoff! Looks like we might have company!" Crew members begin shouting directions back and forth, and the pilot scrambles to the cockpit to get the engines spooled up. *What kind of trouble have they run into? Vanessa thinks, I hope we weren't wrong about them.....*

Much sooner than she expected, the silver SUV skids to a halt a few feet from the airplane. From the passenger side, a bruised and battered Emily Finn leaps out, pulling a blood-covered individual from the back seat. Vanessa and crew members rush to her aid, but the figure that emerges from the driver's seat stuns Vanessa into confused stillness. *Mr. B??*

Sure enough, Neil races around the SUV, helping carry the bloody woman that Vanessa can now identify as April Shanaghan. Snapping out of her wonderment, Vanessa rushes forward. "Emily! What happened? Where's Danny and Robbie?"

"They're right behind us! We've got to get out of here, there are Brotherhood troops coming! April's been shot, she's fading fast, lost a lot of blood! Do you have any medical supplies?"

"Of course!" Vanessa shouts, signalling a nearby crewmember to grab what he can from the plane. "Neil...what...how..."

"There's time for explanations later Vanessa, but for now it looks like you've got your wish, I'll be accompanying you to The Free World." He embraces her warmly, and for a moment the situation calms, but as she looks out at the rapidly approaching dust cloud, something in the air catches her eye.

"Emily, what the hell is that?" she asks, pointing toward the streak in the sky. Emily looks up from her injured friend.

"Goddamn military drones, they attacked while we were at the Brotherhood compound. Looks like they followed."

"Drones? That's not good, we'd better hurry." She shouts a few orders, and the flight crew steps up the speed of their preparations. A stretcher is rushed out, and April's

weak form is placed atop it before the crew hauls her aboard. Seeing their friend safely aboard the plane, Emily and Neil join Vanessa at the edge of the field, staring intently at the approaching cloud. Vanessa hands the binoculars off to Emily.

"That's them!" she shouts, "It has to be! Come on Danny...they've got a bit of a lead, but it looks like it's going to be close, we should get ready."

Vanessa nods, and the three of them begin to head to the plane when Vanessa catches sight of a drone that has broken formation. It screams out ahead of the group, straight toward the airfield.

"Wait! Stop!" she screams, realizing what is about to happen not a moment too soon. Rushing past the other two, she gestures wildly to the crew in and around the plane. "Get out! Run!! Get out of there before it's too l-" Her wild shouts are cut off as a missile launches from the drone, flying forward at incredible speed toward their plane; it tears through the hull and blows the body of the craft apart in a fiery inferno.

Emily sinks to her knees beside Vanessa, who finds herself unable to release the scream of anguish caught in her throat, watching her friends go up in flame alongside the newly arrived April. The world feels distant and dulled as she stares at the destruction, only vaguely aware of Neil grabbing and pulling them to the relative safety of the nearby hangar. As they reach the doorway, Danny roars to a stop in a large truck, leaping out and yelling for help as he sprints to the other side of the vehicle to help a bloody Clint stumble out. Emily is beside her husband in a flash, helping him yank open the rear door to extract their still-unconscious son, entangled in a metal contraption.

What have I gotten us into? Vanessa thinks, as the group tears across the final few feet to the hangar just as more trucks encroach on the airfield, weapons blazing. Everyone hits the ground as Danny heaves the hangar door partially closed. Bullets tear through the sheet metal like tissue-paper, more than one of them grazing Danny before he throws himself on the ground with the others, his blood rapidly pooling beneath him as he crawls toward his family. Emily hugs Robbie to herself as she reaches toward her husband, whose motion slows with each drag across the dusty concrete. Vanessa looks around in dismay, her entire world falling to pieces, when she meets eyes with Neil. As she looks into them, she sees the moment he switches from contemplation to decision. He smiles sweetly in her direction, and somehow the terror in her heart begins to quell.

Neil draws his feet underneath him, and with a look of intense concentration, he stands. Vanessa tries to pull him back down, but the barrage of bullets prevents her from reaching him in time. She watches in awe as the air around him begins to shimmer like heat waves in the summer. He rises up to his full height and begins to walk forward, and as he steps in front of her, she feels the spray of bullets cease to reach behind him. With difficulty, he makes the last few steps to the entrance, placing himself between the onslaught and his friends, hands extended in front of him as if he were pushing some massive, invisible object.

Vanessa, Danny, and Emily cower behind him, gazing in wonderment at the inexplicable sight. They can see the bullets stopping in mid-air where Neil stands. A grenade explodes mere feet in front of him, and while he is forced a step backward, Vanessa blinks in astonishment as the explosion appears to be absorbed by Neil. As that happens, his form appears to stutter in and out of view, revealing a much bigger form within before the illusion is restored.

What is happening? she thinks, and to her astonishment, she hears a reply inside her own mind.

Do not worry. I will do what I can. I have called for aid...I just need to hold on...a little longer...

Though he did not speak, Vanessa is sure the words came from Neil, who appears to be struggling as fire is concentrated on his location. He leans into the barrage, his whole form shaking with the effort. Every so often a bullet now streaks past the invisible barrier he seems to be holding up, and he screams under the immense strain.

"Please!!" he calls out, his voice ringing out both physically, and in her mind, though it seems to be directed at no one in particular. "We cannot abandon them! I have made my decision, do not abandon me now! PLEASE!!!"

Just as it seems that Neil will break under the forces directed toward him, an ethereal voice calls out in all of their minds.

Do not despair, HZ. We have not abandoned you, and we will not abandon them.

A shockwave reverberates across the airfield, and suddenly a massive white craft appears in the sky above as if from nowhere at all. Neil slumps to the ground as all of the weapons outside dematerialize in the hands of the soldiers, who are frozen in fright. Neil turns back to his human friends and with a weak smile on his face that begins to fade as his human form dissipates, revealing a grey, alien form beneath.

They have come, he says, the translucent form of his human mouth moving along with the telepathic message, *we are safe now. We will gather them all, Vanessa, and bring them to you.* And then the world turns white.

CLOSING

Supetar, Croatia (The Free World)

Noah Levi

“No one needs to lose, for everyone to win.”

Noah Levi steps out in front of the cheering crowd, all smiles and waves. Looking out at the gathering, his chest swells with pride and joy. Placing a hand over his heart, he bows gently to show his appreciation and waits a moment for the fervor to settle before beginning his speech.

"Thank you all for attending our show this evening! Tonight, we celebrate the accomplishments of the past six years, accomplishments that not too long ago would have been dismissed as impossible. I think we have shown emphatically with just a dollop of understanding that the Free World is a reality - and everyone can win, without anyone losing!

We told them that the eight-hour workday was a thing of the past, that people would only work as much as they *wanted* to. They told us it was impossible, that nothing would get done. Well, we've got an exponentially growing community that would beg to differ!

We told them that we'd outgrown the need for money. That Capitalism was a cancer, a tool of oppression that we would no longer inflict upon our people. They told us that we were crazy, that the system would break down before we knew what was happening. That we would devolve into a communist hellscape where everyone lived a life of lack. Well, I hate to disappoint the capitalist overlords, but things seem pretty dang abundant here to me!

We have the best medical technology in the world. A better, more accessible educational system than even I had envisioned! You know, since establishing The Free World, I've become a skilled plumber, electrician, pianist, yogi, and martial artist. And while the ramshackle state of my garden suggests otherwise, Ryan Addison assures me he'll give me a green thumb yet!" He pauses to allow a chuckle to ripple through the crowd. "The point is that none of this would have been possible without all of you. When we set out on this journey, I couldn't have dreamed of a better, more compassionate, cooperative group of people with which to found a new world.

You've proven that we are capable of breaking out of the hunter-gatherer winner takes all mindset. That we can and will set aside our differences to work together for the betterment of everyone, with fresh understanding of what makes us all human, a way of life which favours the betterment of the species and not the individual.

But you've heard enough of me yammering on, you came here tonight to be entertained! So, without further ado, please enjoy the food provided by Zoe, help

yourselves to a refreshing drink from our bar, sit back, relax, and treat your ears to the delightful jazz stylings of my beautiful wife: Adriana Levi!"

A rousing chorus of claps and cheers rises into the air as the first few chords of "Fly Me To The Moon" ring out from the piano, and Adriana steps up to the microphone. Noah sinks into the background, the corners of his lips seemingly permanently lifted into a warm smile, a satisfied sigh escaping as Adriana's voice rings out clear and true.

Suddenly, Bea activates an alert on his implant, interrupting his reverie.

"Noah Levi, I am picking up a strange reading. Something is approaching!"

Noah's eyes narrow slightly, and he steps away from the crowd to address the issue. "What do you mean by 'something', Bea?"

"I am afraid I cannot elaborate. The signal is something I have never detected before. It is quite an anomaly. However, I can tell you that the anomaly will not remain a mystery for too much longer. Whatever it is will be arriving in Free World airspace momentarily."

"Airspace? Bea, you're not making any sense..." He trails off mid-sentence when he realizes that Adriana has lost focus, her last note echoing away into nothing as she stares skyward. Noah follows her gaze, squinting up into the sky, where his brain short-circuits trying to comprehend what he is seeing.

Floating silently down toward them is a triangular white object, almost camouflaged by the wisps of cloud scattered in its vicinity. Its graceful descent belies the speed it must be moving at, as it quickly grows to a mind-boggling size. Before long, the entire village has craned their necks to fixate on the object, mouths hanging open.

"Bea, what the heck is that thing?" Noah asks in bewilderment.

"It appears to a craft, although it is powered by no propulsion system that I am aware of. I would suggest that this ship is not of this world."

Completely entranced, Noah wends his way through the stunned crowd and approaches the open space where the craft is rapidly descending. Without so much as a tick or whir, it comes to a mind-bending stop twenty feet above the ground. Adriana joins Noah, bringing Simon and Karine Craig with her.

"What was that you were saying about the impossible, Noah?" Simon quips as he studies the empty air upon which the enormous ship appears to be resting, astounded at how little it seems to affect the area around it. "That thing is breaking every known law of physics..."

"Bea," Noah cuts in, "please tell me you're recording your scans?"

"I'm sorry Noah, But I seem to be incapable of recording information regarding that ship."

"Damn, that's a shame. Not terribly surprising though, if this is any indication of the technology they have at their disposal."

"They?" asks Karina, but before anyone can respond the entire village gasps in sync as their consciousness is linked to the entities within. A state of profound calm and joy settles deep within each member of The Free World, and in their now collective mind's eye the idea of a large figure emerges. Its eyes are large, dark, and oval, set in a smooth, grey face topped with a large, bald head.

Someone thinks, *What's happening?* and the thought refracts through each of their minds. Almost immediately, a response is felt within them all.

Do not be afraid. You have been joined in our telepathic link. We will perceive your thoughts, and you will perceive ours. Long ago, our people - the Zincods - evolved our empathic senses to a point where verbal communication is no longer required. I believe you will find this form of communication to be much more efficient. We have been watching you for quite some time. As emissaries of the Galactic Federation, we Zincods do not normally interfere in the affairs of young species. It is policy not to intrude until the Federation has decided that a species is ready for first contact. Humankind is not yet ready to join the ranks of the Federation. Your world is torn asunder by brutality and low-frequency ways of life. However, 'The Free World' has given us hope that humanity will survive itself. We believe that the ethical burden is to help guide this emerging rise of compassionate consciousness on your planet.

Among my people, I am known as HZ, however, I have worked closely with your ambassador, Vanessa Hemp, under the guise of a human form named Neil. Most regretfully, it would seem that your newest Free World recruits, along with Vanessa and several other special human subjects have been the target of ill-conceived violence. We have intervened in matters, which has forced our hand in making this early contact. While we have mended what injury we can at short notice, if you would be so kind as to prepare your medical facilities, we will transfer these humans to your care.

Noah is astonished to realize that the entirety of the message appears to have formed as a single knowing in his mind all at once, accompanied by a warm glow that he is aware is felt by all around him as well. Moving with precision and complete understanding, several people, including the Patels and other medically skilled members of The Free World, step forward as a bright light emits from the bottom of the ship. When the light cuts out, nearly a hundred new human figures stand before them.

Noah recognizes the Finns, looking worse for wear, near the front of the group, positioned with Vanessa. Somehow, the expected air of confusion that Noah knows should accompany this experience is completely absent, as those who are most in need

of medical care are carried off for treatment. Vanessa approaches, her eyes ablaze with wonder.

"Noah, isn't it incredible?"

Noah can only smile widely, laughing in a buoyant lack of disbelief. The voice of a young child cuts through, calling Vanessa's name. She turns and opens her arms, wrapping the boy into a big hug. "Samar! Looks like you've made it to The Free World!"

"I always hoped I would! But I never expected to arrive in a spaceship!! How cool is this? Oh hey, I want you to meet a friend of mine." Samar runs off for a moment, returning hand-in-hand with a dangerous-looking blonde woman. "This is Zasha. She was going to kill me, but then the Zincods came and made her realize that wasn't such a good idea. Can she stay too?"

"If she wants to. The Free World is for everyone." They look up at Zasha's tear-stained face.

"I do not think," she begins in her thick Russian accent, "that this paradise is meant for people like me. I am not...a good person."

Noah steps forward and places a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Zasha, this is a world for everyone. Wherever you've come from, whatever you've done, you will be welcome here so long as you can accept our core tenet. The Free World is founded on the idea that, whenever possible, and wherever needed, you give to the next person. It seems Samar here has given you a gift of forgiveness, no one here will take that from you. The only question is whether or not you will accept it." He offers his hand for a shake and Zasha stares at it numbly for a moment.

"Give to the next person? I can see the reason behind this request. The Zincods have humbled me, showing me what it is you stand for. She turns back to Samar, "shall we give them your gift? It feels like it will be in good hands here." Samar nods happily, and instead of shaking Noah's hand, she places a small package in it.

"What's this?" he asks, turning it over to examine it.

"This, is the antidote device for the satellite grid," comes the answer.

Simon's eyes go wide, and he splutters and stammers as he almost lunges for the package, tearing the covering away and staring hungrily at the drive inside. "My god," he whispers, "this will change everything!" Wrapping the drive back up tenderly, Simon turns back to the alien craft still hovering nearby. His thirst for knowledge can be felt by everyone present. In fact, as Noah looks around, he can see that the telepathic link that the Zincods established has led to a spontaneous eruption of emotion, with people bursting into tears and hugging those around them. Every emotional and energetic block seems to be lifted, and every human can hear and feel everyone else's thoughts and emotions. It's an openness unlike anything any of them have ever experienced, and for the first time, Noah truly glimpses what a united world could one day mean. There is much work to do, but with the help of their new friends, he believes more fervently than ever that they might just heal this fractured world.

