

Trown

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A 10-year-old kid in bright yellow shorts whizzed through the park on his Skiin, hovering centimeters above the ground and leaning his body this way, then that, to guide the hoverboard in the direction he wanted to go. He twisted his body and scrunched down, lost his footing, and was dumped off the Skiin hoverboard, which instantly, intuitively moved back under his feet and brought the young man to balance once again before his body tumbled more than a few centimeters toward the Earth. The kid's eyeballs returned to their sockets as he recovered the smile on his face. He and his Skiin continued across the park, nearly running over Ben as he came out of one of the government office buildings lining the park. Ben threw his hands up and to his side to provide momentum as he shoved his torso in the opposite direction to make space for the kid and avoid being run over. He recovered his stance and watched the kid disappear around a circle of shrubs as he spoke to the persachip embedded in his wrist, "Send directive to Skiin development team through Cheryl Norberg." He began walking toward the nearest trow pod.

"Hi Cheryl. I think for the 2103 model year we need to tweak the Skiins' object-avoidance programming, specifically anticipating emerging objects. Some kid almost took me out; wouldn't want to see it happen to someone's grandmother. I'm heading down to Project Neptune; I may stay overnight, if need be. I'll call you when I have something to report."

He approached the trow pod, then noticed a holographic notice floating above: "Out of Service". Ben rubbed the back of his neck as he dictated an addendum to his message to Norberg. "I know it probably self-reported, but tele-pod CC43 in Crystal City is down. This is the second one I've run into in the past week. Maybe someone should look into the causes. We wouldn't want another quarantine."

Ben headed for another trow pod to teletransport to his next appointment, passing a man sitting on one of the many benches placed throughout the park. He reached the pod, entered, and the door closed behind him. He confirmed his destination to the pod and in two seconds was inside the trow pod at his destination at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

The man on the bench back in Crystal City was dressed in a grey, double-breasted suit, complimented by stubby, black loafers which gave away his slavery to bureaucracy. He sat stiffly on the bench, oblivious to his surroundings and occasionally munching on a factory-made labra-turkey wrap while shuffling through work documents, the holographic pages floating in air. He took for granted the bright, blue sky that the reduction of Co2's, and the dome covering the city

made possible, and which protected it from the late September heat beyond the dome's plaztik perimeter.

The man was engrossed in his work; he made no notice of people passing nearby in various models of Skiins, travelling to work, or home, or to a restaurant, or a coffee shop, all destinations too nearby to justify wasting a trow. The city, so noisy in decades past, remained busy, but was quieter now, the sound of conversations broken only by the gentle hum of passing Skiins, children playing in the lush greenery that filled the former streets, or stingerless bees gathering the abundant nectar from some of their favorite Cornflower and Horsemint blossoms. Where once motorized automobiles honked and screeched down the busy byways, in their place now were trees, ball fields, family play areas. The air was fresh and clean; nothing blocked the sweet, heady scent of gardenias clumped next to the bench the man sat on, or the wafting reach of lilies growing around the periphery of a nearby pond.

The man on the bench suddenly grew tense as he went over in his mind the video *Save* he had just been sent; he had already expressed the *Save* directly through his persachip imbedded in his wrist, which had downloaded it directly to his brain. He was so troubled by what he saw that he decided to actually view the video of his daughter at a local playground near his home back in Minneapolis. He called up the video *Save* and it appeared before him. He saw a little girl, his daughter, being approached by the person recording the *Save* as she played. He heard a human voice ask, "You want to go for a ride on my Skiin?" The girl shook her head 'no' and started backing away. "Good girl," her father thought to himself. But the man behind the *Save* did not give up and continued to coax the little girl toward him. As he realized the threat to his family, his brow lowered, his smile disappeared. He swiped his hand across the projection to move to a later point in the *Save*. He started to sweat, his jaw slackened and his eyes widened when the *Save* showed his smiling daughter approaching the unseen person recording it. He swiped his hand down and it stopped playing. His nostrils flared as he jumped up from the bench and reached for his Skiin. His work documents faded away and the man absently gripped his lunch bag, then stepped on the Skiin and motioned with his hand for it to move forward. He needed to get to her right away. He guided his route by continually moving his hand left, then right, then straight ahead. The Skiin responded in perfect synchronicity to his hand movements. He weaved the Skiin around benches, alongside a glass building, across a pond. He rounded a corner, heading toward his office building to seek help from Security before transporting to his home in Minneapolis.

A few meters before he reached his destination a woman in a blue Plaztik dress, standing near a clump of trees, targeted the man with a small, black device. She smiled as her diversionary tactic to lure the man toward her seemed to be working. He was unaware of her presence as she pressed a button on the tubular device, not unlike a 20<sup>th</sup> Century flashlight. It threw an opaque, bluish beam of light that enveloped the man. Immediately the man's body became transparent, and in a half-second, completely disappeared. The Skiin continued a meter or two on its own, then came to a dead stop, hovering above the sidewalk, awaiting its rider.

The woman looked around to ensure no one had seen what had just taken place. She said to her persachip, "Target identified and neutralized. Returning immediately." She tossed the device in her bag then mounted her own Skiin. In a few seconds she arrived at a trow pod, the same one Ben had utilized and one of 243 in Crystal City.

The pod was gleaming white, about the height of a tall man and half that in width. The name *Fereday* was emblazoned on the outer shell of the pod, just above the door. The door opened as an older woman approached the pod to teletransport herself to a luncheon engagement. She said, "Corsair Street Station, Tucson, Arizona", and stepped inside. The pod repeated her destination, "Corsair Street Station, Tucson, Arizona". The woman said, "Confirm" as the trow pod door slid closed. A second later the door reopened; the pod was empty. The woman in blue then approached the pod, stated her destination, "Westminster Palace, London, United Kingdom", stepped inside the pod, and turned to face the door as it closed and she heard the pod confirm her destination. Her tight lips hinted at the nervousness she tried to hide, hoping no one had noticed her actions in the park. A moment later the empty trow pod again reopened, awaiting its next passenger.

Ben looked up through the Plexon dome. No warming rays of sunlight reached this far down; marine life at this depth was sparse, but hardy. A Frilled-Shark glided over the dome, testing its smooth surface as it went along; it chomped down on a surprised Giant Spider Crab and continued along the bottom of the sea, furiously tearing at the crab. There were people interested in living here, but many questioned the desire to reside in such an inhospitable place, which is why it took so long to secure the funding and permits for constructing the city. Even with the advanced technologies of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century, building codes remained strict, sometimes frustratingly so.

At this stage in the project and from his vantage point atop a pile of steel girders, Ben could take in much of the sea floor and virtually all of the future city's framework. His first task was to check the plans of the gym. The U.S.C. was very strict with new building regulations; an error in any of the project's plans could result in many deaths. The Fereday Corporation had the contract to build the city, and part of Ben's job was to manage the overall project, an additional assignment recently handed him by his boss when the previous project manager failed to show up at the site one day.

Ben descended from the girders and moved across steel foundations with the grace of an athlete. His strong jaw and pointed nose complemented his large, dark eyes and coal-black hair; his large hands and powerful chest left no doubt as to his prowess. Ben understood the role his soccer days played in his career advancement, not to mention his time with Special Forces. But it had been his diplomatic finesse and his ability to deliver on projects that propelled him to this point in his life. Two men looked up as Ben made his way toward them.

"Well, well, well. Ben Barnett. We were certain we'd *never* see one of you big executives down here!", one of the site managers, Gleeson, said, offering his hand. "At least not until the grand opening". The city's lights reflecting off Gleeson's shocking red hair attracted a few sea creatures to the dome and made him look younger than his 45 years.

Ben looked up to shake hands with both men. "Somebody's gotta' watch over you guys."

The other man, Jose, was about a decade younger. He was taller and thinner than Gleeson and was charged with placement of the pre-built sections of the city.

"When did you get here?", asked Jose.

"Yesterday. I've been going over things on this side of the project."

"Is this your first time here?"

“Yeah”, replied Ben. “But certainly not my last. Afraid you’re going to be seeing a lot more of me from now on.”

“So, how do we look?”, asked Gleeson. Ben could hear the sounds of workers. A few were flesh-and-blood humans, but most were digital mechanicals, placing pre-built walls, installing plumbing and air conditioning tubes, welding framing into place. Mechanicals did not complain about the difficult working conditions or being forced to stay on site weeks at a time due to limited transport capabilities. Initial plans had called for only one teletransportation trow pod. Despite the limited number of humans working the project, one trow pod was not sufficient for the task.

The bright, flickering light from the welding startled away some sea life and attracted others. An eight-story building was mostly completed, the city’s sole hotel. Ben would return here again and again, not always in the best of circumstances.

He looked around to take in the progress being made. He saw townhome and apartment building foundations being set into place; in the distance an amphitheater was nearly completed, lacking only its stone and mother-of-pearl façade. There were a handful of single-family homes nearing completion.

“Things are looking very good...I can sign off on everything and you can begin placing the gym pre-builts.”

“Thanks, Mr. Barnett”, said Jose. “This is the biggest underwater project we’ve ever worked on...we all want to be sure we get this one right.”

“Please, call me Ben. Well, you are getting it right, and you don’t need me to tell you. I just want to have someone in to check to see how the dome is holding up.”

Ben noticed how pale the two men were. He looked up at the dome again. “So how long have you boys been down here?”

Jose replied, “Three months. I don’t think my little girl will remember me.”

Ben’s eyes doubled in size. “What? Aren’t you guys trowing home every once in a while?”

Gleeson looked at Jose, then said, “You didn’t know our one and only trow pod conked out?” That ‘one and only’ was meant as a dig.

Ben’s eyebrows shot dome-ward. “I’m sorry, I haven’t heard about any pod trouble.”

“Yeah”, Jose continued. “Our pod started acting up...threw a shipment of supplies outside the dome. So we weren’t going to take any chances on it until we knew what was up. And Renders’

disappearance slowed things down. They just recertified the new pod yesterday... had to drop it down in a submersible; took three days. I'm trowing home in a couple of hours."

Gleeson jumped in, "We reported all this to Fereday. We asked for a second pod, just in case it happens again."

Ben replied, "I'm sure they're working on it." He thrust his hands in his pockets and stood like a guilty little boy who was caught taking a ball away from his little brothers. "I was just assigned this project. I'll get you a backup pod right away." Ben didn't like screw ups, and said to the persachip in his wrist, "Follow up on status of additional trow pod on Project Neptune." Ben's persachip responded, "Reminder set."

Gleeson continued, "Are you still heading up the new Moon Colony project?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm still on that one. But when Bill Renders disappeared I had to take over this project, too...at least temporarily. You may be getting a new project manager soon."

"Still no word on Renders?" asked Jose.

"No, none", said Ben. "Some guys just get overwhelmed and trow themselves to a nice little getaway. This is an important project, a lot of pressure. He'll probably show up, sometime, tanned and with a new girl on his arm. 'Till then you're stuck with me."

Ben made light of Bill Renders' disappearance, but he knew Renders and knew that he would never walk away from a project; Ben was concerned. All three men stood a moment, not knowing what to say about Bill Renders. Finally, Gleeson said, "We're glad to have you on board."

"I hope I can be of help keeping the project on schedule." As he spoke, Ben called up city plans and documents. A 3-D blueprint and material standards listings appeared before them. "According to our construction schedule, we're a couple weeks behind. How can we catch up?"

Jose pointed to the city's swimming pool location on the blueprint. "We're having a little trouble trenching for the pool plumbing; we're taking it slow so we don't create any new fissures in the sea floor and damage the dome."

Ben looked at the blueprint as well. "I'll have to get into Renders' files to see how he planned to proceed on that. I'll let you know what I come up with. Anything else?"

I need you to check something out in the food bodega while you're here."

"Glad to."

Before they could head for the food storage warehouse Ben received a call. The name, "Brynn", appeared before him, in light blue script, the letters dancing above his head. Brynn liked

to “dress up” her call personalizations; Ben kept his personalizations set to “default”; just a hologram of him and his name. “You guys go ahead...I’ll join you in a minute.”

High above a lantern fish swam close to the dome, lighting its own way by use of its bioluminescence.

Ben reached up and swiped his hand down Brynn’s name. A full-body hologram of Brynn appeared before him. She was in a plaztik track suit, her usual uniform when in ‘full-mother mode’.

Looking around, Brynn said, “Where are you?”

Ben stretched out both his arms. “Welcome to Atlantis City.”

“Oooh, so they’re really going through with it?”

“It took a lot of government prodding and needling, but in about 11 months I’ll invite you to the grand opening.”

“I’m not so certain I want to trow myself two kilometers down to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.”

“Brynn, it’s 2102, a new century. We’re building the Moon Colony, soon we start the Mars settlement. When are you going to enjoy all that modern life has to offer?”

“Just call me an old-fashioned girl.”

“Old-fashioned is one thing, living in the dark-ages is another.”

Brynn shared Ben’s athletic build and dark brown eyes, but her pink skin, juxtaposed against Ben’s darker, olive complexion made them look anything but siblings.

“Yeah. Speaking of ages, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you. You don’t seem to care much for Spokane. Perhaps you’re adverse to the entire state of Washington...or are you avoiding me?”

“Ah, there’s the guilt...*Mom*.”

Brynn smiled. “How about lunch?”

“Today?”

“I just sent the kids home. I have a couple of hours...you?”

Ben lifted his wrist using a pre-determined gesture; his persachip instantly displayed before him his location, weather, and date and time. “Sounds great. Where?”

“Well, I can’t trow again today, so someplace nearby. What about you? Can you trow?”

“Yeah, I stayed here overnight, so I have both my trows, today.”

“Do you know the Everest Café in Arkhale?”



“Arkhale?”

“A little suburb outside Spokane.”

“I’ll tie up a few things here and be there in about 20 minutes.” Ben was keenly aware that meeting Brynn meant that after lunch he would have to trow directly home, unless he wanted to spend a second night in Atlantis City.

“Okay. See you.”

Brynn’s hologram faded away. Ben closed all his digital files on the Atlantis City project and began the 10-minute walk to the food bodega, where he made more promises of equipment deliveries, checked out the amphitheater, then continued to the trow pod, located in the center of the future underwater city. As he passed the hotel, he captured a quick vid of this newest area of Atlantis to send to his boss. He decided to call her, instead, and said to his persachip, “Contact Cheryl Norberg.”

Norberg’s hologram appeared in front of Ben. “Hi Ben. What’s up?”

“I want to send you a vid. Thought you might want to see the progress. Also, I just found out they’re having pod problems down here.”

Cheryl Norberg was tiny, but no one who knew her dared to underestimate her power, physical or emotional. “Yeah, I know. We had to drop them a new pod.”

“Maybe we should send them another?”

“We’re already on it. A second pod arrives in an hour.” She was way ahead of him. Working with Norberg Ben grew used to always having to play catch-up. She didn’t like screw-ups either; the pod problems had been exacerbated by Renders’ disappearance, so it was doubly impressive that Norberg was on top of things. “Are you coming back to the office today?”

“No. I’m going to visit my sister in Spokane.”

“Fine. But I need to see you tomorrow...in the office, please.”

“Something up?”

“Bill Renders still hasn’t turned up. We’re worried and I want you to look into it for me.”

“Shouldn’t that be a job for Security? I’m not certain I’m the best person for the job.”

“I need someone with your *special* experience.” When speaking with Ben, or if Ben was within earshot, Norberg usually worked in Ben’s Special Forces experience. He seemed proud of it and she thought he always lit up whenever there was talk of his days with the Army’s special missions unit. Norberg was good at sizing people up and giving them whatever it was that

motivated them; she liked to indulge Ben's pride. And why not take advantage of a decorated Special Forces operative right under her nose? "There may be more to Renders' disappearance than we initially thought. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Okay...see you then." He wondered what Norberg did know about Render's disappearance, then caught himself. "Stay focused, Ben."

Ben enjoyed his position with Fereday Space and had convinced himself he didn't want anything to change, yet he felt conflicted. He wanted to help find Bill Renders, but was uncomfortable with the thought of heading up some kind of investigation; he preferred action over inquiry and had worked hard to put his days with Special Forces behind him. Yet memories of missions kept creeping into his mind. He often pictured himself with his team on a special reconnaissance mission or ensuring internal defense in a foreign country.

"Stay in the present," he told himself as his mind drifted back to the present. "Forget about the past. Keep moving forward."

As he continued to the trow pod his thoughts bounced around, to Renders, to his lunch date with his sister, to his work – he now had two huge projects to worry about, neither commanding his full attention at the moment. Upon reaching the trow pod he said, "Mt. Everest Café, Arkhale." He stepped into the pod and it replied, "Mt. Everest Café..."

Ben too-quickly said, "Confirmed".

As the pod door closed he heard the pod continue its confirmation, "...Arkhale, Nepal".

15 meters below the mountain's peak, a man of 48 years willed himself ever upward. His red climbing suit was white and stiff with snow and ice. Despite its protection, the cold managed to reach his fingers and toes, which he kept moving to try to keep the blood circulating. Without the suit he would last about 20 minutes before his body temperature dropped to below 21 degrees – and certain death. He bashed his hands together to keep them from locking up in the -35 degree air. His face was too numb to reveal the pain he felt from the cold's effects on his reddish-brown nose. He batted his eyelids every so often to try to dislodge the icicles enmeshed in his lashes. His ears felt as if they were on fire.

The man's climbing partner daughter was steps behind him, also in a bright red suit, also snow-stained white. Her eyes were mere slits in their attempt to insulate them from the cold. They were both part of a group of 13 people who pulled themselves up the mountain. One man moaned with every step; another tried to look forward, but the wind and freezing temperature forced his head down. All struggled to keep moving.

The group moved in tiny steps as they approached the peak. Some fell to the icy ground as the wind blew gales; they then worked to pull themselves upright again. They all wore several layers of clothing and climbing suits, culminating in down parkas with hoods, heavy gloves, and snow boots, their faces wrapped in wooline scarves, with goggles protecting their eyes. They were worn, tired, hungry, and in danger of frostbite; one was already facing the loss of a nose if she didn't soon do something to better protect it. They were tethered to one another every meter. The leader, a Sherpa, ushered them on; pointing to the peak only a few meters ahead, his hands stabbing the air. One exhausted man went down to his knees, ready to succumb to the elements, but was soon pulled up by his climbing partner. The line of adventurers continued their last few steps to their goal. Snow was blowing and swirling; it was near white-out conditions.

Just above the climbing group's heads a man's grey-suited arm stuck out the side of the mountain, his lunch sack still clutched in his hand. Beneath his dangling arm one of the man's stubby, black-loafered feet jutted out from the rocky mountain, pointing toward the peak. No one in the climbing group yet noticed the body.

The group reached the peak and tied their flag to a steel girder embedded in the rock. As they continued past their flag to a clearing where they could gather, the snow let up and the air cleared a bit. A building came into view. They passed just outside clear Plexon windows and came

upon a door that read, “Climbers” in several languages. In the past climbers had been tempted to press the button that would throw open the doors so they could find relief in the inviting warmth of the restaurant. None in this group did. In fact, most bemoaned the very existence of the restaurant, located not 25 meters from the mountain’s peak.

The group gathered just above their victory flag and hugged one another; they jumped up and down as much to generate warmth as in celebration of reaching the top. Some had trained 10 years to conquer Mt. Everest “the right way”. There was technology available to warm the ambient air on the mountain, but that would be cheating. There were trow pods to instantly teletransport them to the top of the mountain, but that would be cheating. There was that door marked “climbers”, where they could enter and take advantage of the trow pod located inside to trow to the safety of their homes, or they could rush into the cozy comfort of the restaurant. All that would be cheating.

Climbing Mt. Everest had been made easy; the available technology could guarantee success, but most Everest trekkers felt a strong disdain for anything that might make their climb less than a “natural” experience; the entire reason for climbing Everest is to test the boundaries of human endurance, to thumb noses at modern technology, to feel alive and in control of one’s destiny.

There was one cheater in the group. A kid of 15 reached into his backpack, pulled out a Skiin, hopped aboard, and began a quick descent down the mountain as the other climbers stared in disbelief, some shaking their heads as the kid yelled, “Yipeeeeeee!”

Inside the restaurant adjacent to the peak, a small girl stood at the transparent wall, looking out to the passing climbers. She was in a summery dress, her nose pressed to the Plexon glass. A climber waved to the girl, who then turned and ran to her table and the safety of her mother and father.

Andry quickly and efficiently delivered food orders to diners in the café, then returned to the kitchen for his next delivery. He floated around the room, clearing tables, refilling drinks, vacuuming the floor as he passed over it. His purple and yellow one-piece nylon suit remained motionless as he flew around the restaurant, adhering to his programming. His face was completely obscured by his scarf, which wrapped around his head and covered his nose and mouth; only his metallic eyes peered out from behind the clothing. This outfit would look silly on anyone in the café other than a DH - digital human.

Tucked into one corner of the cafe was the restaurant's trow pod. The pod doors opened and Ben stepped out and looked around. He smelled the mix of various spices hanging in the air, which whetted his appetite. His eyes searched the room, then moved past the perimeter of the café and landed on the mountaintop. A millisecond later his smile turned upside down as he realized his mistake. His brow furrowed and his hand rubbed the back of his neck as the doors behind him again opened. An older couple, a stooped, bald man and a woman with gray hair, exited the trow pod to step past Ben and into the café. Both smiling, they took a moment to admire the peak of Mt. Everest just a few meters away, then walked to a table for two, a hologram of their name, "Pulaski", hovering above it. They sat and holographic menus appeared before them. A wave of the man's hand over the menu began an audio recitation of the day's offerings. A hot beef stew seemed to be the big hit for lunch; the menu bragged that 74 bowls had been served that day as a virtual, holographic steaming bowl floated past the couple, enticing their noses with its slightly pungent aroma.

Ben looked around the restaurant. The transparent Plexon glass walls were made of a resin that was an amalgam of glass and plasztik, the 'miracle material'. Plexon was stronger than steel; its creation, 32 years earlier in 2070, changed how and where cities were built and was one of the technological advancements that helped mitigate some of the effects of global warming.

The kitchen was beyond the trow pod, with lunch counters lining the front, their stools filled with hungry diners. The ceiling was also transparent, affording an almost 360 degree view of Mt. Everest, creating the feeling of sitting outside in the open, except that inside it was toasty warm.

Realizing his trow mistake, Ben wondered what to do about Brynn; what to do with himself for the next hour as he waited the requisite time between trows. He stepped aside to allow others to enter and exit the trow pod. The restaurant, one of the most popular on Earth, was packed. Families sat around large stone tables; a young couple at another table was unaware of anyone but themselves; two businesswomen clinked coffee cups over a deal between their respective companies. All were dressed for the cozy warmth of the café: men in slacks and sweaters, women in skirts and blouses or colorful dresses, children in plasztik jeans. Two young boys pointed at the mountain climbers just beyond the glass and laughed. A couple was on a holographic date; he, sitting in a booth in the Mt. Everest Café while his date was at home, nursing a broken leg. But she was able to sit across from her date in the form of a hologram.

Ben said to his persachip, "Contact Brynn." Her image appeared before him once again.

"So where are you?", she asked, her pink cheeks decidedly redder.

"I'm sorry, Brynn, I wasn't paying attention and confirmed the wrong destination. I realized my mistake as soon as I stepped out of the pod."

"Where are you?"

"The Mount Everest Café in Arkhale, *Nepal*."

"Damn, Ben! You are so distracted these days. Where is your head?"

Ben chose not to answer that. He didn't know where his head was, and he wasn't interested in getting a lecture from Brynn.

"Can we try this again next week?" Ben looked around the café to see if there was any seating available. He saw a man sitting alone at a table for two at the far end of the room.

"It's been months since I've seen you...I guess another week won't kill us."

Ben began making his way to the other side of the busy café. Brynn's image followed alongside him.

"What are you going to do?" Brynn continued.

"What can I do? I'm stuck here for a while. May as well make the best of it."

"Listen, when we do get together, we have to discuss Mom and Dad."

Ben's attention was focused on the table and the handsome man sitting at it.

"Ben, what are you doing? You're looking right through me."

"Sorry. Sorry Brynn." Ben stopped walking. "Mom and Dad are always number one on my list. I'll see you next week and we'll talk."

"Bye, Ben. Make sure you don't forget!"

"I won't...it's already in my calendar. Kiss Sarah and Boris for me."

Brynn's image faded with one final "Bye."

At the mention of his calendar, Ben's persachip automatically entered the new appointment: "Same time next week?", said the voice emanating from his wrist.

Ben thought a minute, then responded to his persachip, "That's right. And make certain I give the correct destination next time."

"Appointment confirmed, reminder set", responded his persachip.

Ben reached the table with the handsome stranger.

"Hi. I'm kinda' in a quandry."

“Oh?”, said the man. He put down his spoon and gave Ben his full attention. Looking Ben straight in the eyes were two of the bluest he had ever seen. They were kind and confident and Ben was immediately attracted.

“Yeah...I don't belong here. I confirmed the wrong destination.” Ben started tapping his toe and the furrowed brow melted back into his forehead.

“We've all done it.” The man looked around the room, saw there were no other seats available, smiled internally, stood, and gestured to the empty chair opposite his. “Would you like to join me?”

“If it's not an imposition. Otherwise, I can just stand over there next to the trow pod for an hour.”

The man stood. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you.” Ben shook the man's hand. “Benjamin Barnett.”

Ben's body loosened up; his neck no longer was stiff.

“Robert Connor. Nice to meet you, Benjamin.” The two men held the handshake a bit longer than either of them had intended.

“Please, call me Ben.”

Ben sat upright in the seat, his athletic body filling the contours of his suit. Robert noticed.

Ben cocked his head and looked off toward the mountaintop. He never told people to call him Ben upon first meeting them; that was saved for his colleagues and closest friends and family. He wondered why he had told his lunch savior to call him “Ben”.

“Do you go by ‘Bob’?”

“Almost never”, replied Robert, taking his seat.

“Nice to meet you, Robert.” Ben liked Robert's confidence. He motioned for a menu and one appeared, floating before him.

Robert asked, “So tell me, where *do* you belong?”

“*That*, is an excellent question. I'm not certain where I belong...perhaps this is it.”

Robert's mouth broke out into the smallest smile. “Try the beef stew. It's surprisingly good.”

“So I've heard. Okay, then, it's the stew.”

Seconds later Andry arrived at the table with Ben's stew, napkin, spoon, and a basket of bread.

“So, Benjamin, tell me...where are you *supposed* to be right now?”

“Please... *Ben*. Well, I should be at home, working, but I was supposed to be having lunch with my sister in Spokane. I was distracted and said Mt. Everest Café instead of the Everest Café near Spokane, and here I am.”

“You have a pod in your home?”

“Yeah. Well, that’s not where I came from today, but I do have a pod at home. Well, it’s not really mine, it belongs to the company I work for.”

“That would be Fereday.”

Ben looked up at Robert, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly open. “How did you know that?”

“Fereday is one of the few companies I know that sets up its employees with pods in their homes. Fereday, and the government. You must be pretty important to them.”

“I’m working on the moon project.” Ben wondered why he felt the need to brag to Robert about his job. Was he trying to convince *himself* that he was doing the kind of work he should be doing? Ben blew on his spoonful of stew. He needn’t have as the stew was served at the perfect temperature of 71.1° Celsius, but it was a force of habit.

“The moon? So am I.”

“Really?” Ben liked the way Robert’s short-cropped, black hair perfectly framed his large eyes, Romanesque nose, and wide mouth that showed off his glistening smile. Ben thought this handsome man might actually be out of his league, and so was grateful that his ears were slightly large for his head. Still, they only intensified Ben’s attraction. He hesitated to use the word “cute”, but he couldn’t help but think that Robert was the cutest man he’d met in quite some time.

Robert said, “We’re putting together the treaties required to make certain the U.S.C. has the moon.”

“Ah,” said Ben, “so you work for the government?”

“In Geographic Development.” Robert noticed that at that moment Ben looked out the glass wall to the surrounding mountaintop, his nostrils flaring. “Now don’t tell me you’re miffed about our annexation of the most important possession since The Baltic Corridor?”

Ben was taken off guard. He sat up in his chair. “No, no, not at all. In fact, I’m all for it.” Then he thought to himself, “Miffed? Who says *miffed*?”



Robert continued. “But there are a lot of people who would hate to see us add another twig to the flag...and I mean they would *hate* it.”

Ben leaned over the table a bit. “Believe me, I know. I used to be with the State Department.”

“The State Department?!” Robert pushed his chair back from the stone table. He looked around the room, then snapped his head back to face Ben. “Wait a minute. You’re not *that* Benjamin Barnett.”

“I think I am.”

“Benjamin, you did some great work in Sobhi. And then Nigeria”

“*Ben!*” Despite pleas from Ben to the contrary, for the rest of his life Robert would call him Benjamin. “Thanks. I had a lot of help.”

“So why did you leave the State Department?”

“Those were some tough years; I got a little burned out. And Fereday made me a great offer on the Moon project.”

“I can understand why.” Robert pulled himself closer to the table, again. “Plus, you made a few enemies when we annexed Sobhi, no?”

It was true, Ben had been a target of blame for some who didn’t wish to see Sobhi fall into the hands of the U.S.C. He said, “Yeah, well, the U.K. is still quite upset with us, as you probably are well aware.” Ben liked that Robert wasn’t afraid to speak his mind.

Robert nodded his head slightly. “Unfortunately, I am. We’re working on a few things with them, but they’re just not coming to the table.”

“It’s going to be difficult to get past their collective anger with the U.S.C....I just hope my actions didn’t make matters worse.”

Robert looked Ben in the eyes and said, “What else could have been done? They were certainly in no position to get involved.”

“Yes, of course, what with the quarantine and all. But they took it as quite the slap in the face when we annexed Sobhi.”

“The United Kingdom has a rather large chip on its shoulder. They’re convinced we’re out to get them. Despite honest overtures, they refuse our help.”

“Perhaps that’s because they watched us take over many of their prized possessions,” Ben said, his eyebrows raised.

“They were incapable of managing things. If the U.S.C. had not stepped in, what might have happened? The China States is quite large enough, thank you.”

Ben paused and looked at Robert, who was patiently awaiting his response. Here, he thought, is a man who can intelligently discuss a matter without becoming vitriolic; he loved that. Still, he didn't want to push things too far with Robert. He needn't have worried.

Ben smiled and said, “You keep up with things.”

“I try. It's also my job.” Now Robert was staring at Ben. He looked into eyes that communicated honesty and openness, which Robert liked. It was what had attracted him to Chad. And under that suit he was certain was a very athletic body, topped off by that handsome head of thick, black hair.

“Well,” continued Robert, “our expansion plans are not going to ease tensions with the U.K. I'm sorry for the situation they are in, but they need to get on the ball and play catchup.”

Over the following hour the two men discussed their work, world affairs, and discovered that, although they both enjoyed virtual travel from their home holo-rooms, they each had an affinity for real, physical travel experiences. They learned they had each been in Rome for the annual Rome-Florence bike race a year earlier – Ben as a spectator and Robert as a participant. “Biking is my excuse for traveling.”

“Do you go to Italy often?”

“I've been to the usual haunts: Rome, Florence, Siena. I need to get off the beaten path, more.”

Ben said, “You should check out Les Marche, on the Adriatic.”

Ben talked of his many careers; Robert wondered why such a seemingly talented man had had so many jobs. He sensed in Ben a man feeling lost, which brought out his nurturing side.

“So,” said Robert, “you've already had quite the storied career.”

“Yeah. I guess so.” Ben didn't know why he was opening up to this man he had known only a few minutes. “I've not found the place where I'll spend the rest of my life, but I'm going to keep trying.” Ben felt like he was in a confessional.

Suddenly neither Ben nor Robert had anything more to say. They sat in silence, finishing their lunch. Ben took in Robert's 5' 11" frame; there was a lot to like. He was lithe and lean and he seemed to hit a gym himself with some regularity – or perhaps it was the cycling which seemed

to give Robert both a ruddy and delicate complexion. But mostly Ben was taken by how Robert spoke. Clearly this was a man who knew who he was and didn't try to impress.

After what seemed like several minutes, Robert spoke up. "Are you free tomorrow night?"

Ben smiled, looked away, laughed, and ran his hand through his hair. It had been a while since he had been asked out.

Robert continued before Ben could answer. "How about the Cold Spring Pier in Huntington? There's a Peyton concert at 8:00."

Ben then noticed the ring on Robert's finger. Robert saw Ben looking at it. He raised his head and looked to the mountain peak himself, suddenly wishing he could hide behind it.

"You're married."

"Ah. No, it's just..." Robert looked at Ben a moment. "He died...a long time ago."

"Robert I'm so sorry."

"No, no. It's been six years. I don't know why I still wear it."

"Are you sure you want to..."

"I'm sure. I'll see you tomorrow night." Robert cut Ben off before he could change his mind. He stood and said, "I'll let you finish up that stew. I'm due back at the office...the boss'll be miffed if I'm late."

Ben stood as well, and again ran that word through his brain. "...miffed...hmmm". They shook hands, again. Ben liked how their two hands fit together.

As Robert walked away he reiterated, "8:00, Cold Spring Pier." Ben gave Robert a confirming nod. "And don't waste your trows."

Robert wove his way to the trow pod, removing the wedding ring from his finger and placing it in his suit jacket pocket, all the while chiding himself for still wearing it. Approaching the pod he said, "One to pod USC427."

The pod replied, "One to pod USC427, Washington, D.C."

Robert stepped into the pod. "Confirmed." The doors closed, then the empty trow pod reopened a moment later.

Ben did not take his eyes off Robert until he disappeared behind the trow pod door. He ate a spoonful of his stew, sat back in his chair, and grinned. His eyes were wide with wonder, taking in the now even more beautiful jagged mountaintops and white snow, but his mind was on the very interesting man he had just met.

He did not finish the stew. As he stood to walk to the pod he instructed his persachip to pay the check and, knowing he was about to use his last trow of the day he paid close attention when the trow pod repeated his destination. "Pod TS48, Big Pine Key, Florida". Ben said, "Confirmed." As the pod doors closed he was still thinking about Robert. "Miffed", he said aloud.

Beyond the Plexon glass walls of the Café, the adventurous mountain climbers were gathering around a body that one of the climbers had discovered on an outcropping above their heads. The perpetrators had wanted to make a bold statement with their most recent victim; planting the body at Mt. Everest fulfilled their expectations. Authorities were puzzled how the body had been so cleanly placed, and concealed from the world the plot that had already targeted the famous, the infamous, and ordinary world citizens. Someone seemed to be quite unhappy with the state of world affairs, authorities surmised. The as-yet unknown assailants would plan many more "disappearances" in the coming months. They hoped that, when the time was right, the revelation of the murders and disappearances would disrupt world political institutions and facilitate their end-game goal. And that was the question. Where were these machinations heading?

The Mt. Everest climbers collectively tugged on a stubby, black loafer, then began digging to try to pull the man out from under the ice and snow. But, of course, the man was dead. The group leader raised his wrist and said, "Base Camp". His persachip connected him to one of the climbing administrators. The man then yelled above the sound of the blowing wind, "Belinda, we have a situation up here!"

John Abaddon approached the London Eye bridge. His eyes darted left, then right; he was hyper-aware of his surroundings, as usual. He began to walk across the bridge, but paused to watch workers continuing the deconstruction of the wheel for which the old bridge had been renamed due to its position overlooking the Eye II, the giant enclosed Ferris wheel that had replaced the original Eye back in 2064. A hover-crane moved above the wheel, locking onto deconstructed parts of the wheel to float them down to the ground. In a juxtaposition of old and new, the recently opened Hover-Eye floated in its new space above the Thames, a symbol of hope for the re-emerging nation as it continued its recovery from the virus quarantine. With each passing day, the Hover-Eye loomed larger and larger in Abaddon's mind, a metaphor for the future New British Empire, one that was rising higher with each passing day, overlooking its realm, with John Abaddon as its champion, he would make certain.

As he approached the halfway point of the bridge, Abaddon recognized Barton Smythe, a Parliamentarian from Essex and a member of Colony Dominion. Smythe was looking over the bridge to the Thames, below. Abaddon stopped on the bridge, looked down on the rapidly flowing river, then continued towards Smythe. Smythe put out his hand to shake, but Abaddon ignored the gesture and spoke.

"What are you doing here?" Abaddon's eyes darted left and right to see if anyone else was looking their way.

"Relax. It's just me, John. This is nothing more than two colleagues who happened to meet on the Eye Bridge."

"Don't tell *me* to relax. You have placed me, and yourself, in a very difficult situation," said Abaddon. His wrinkled brow worried Smythe, who absently played with his bow tie. Abaddon said, "If someone sees us together...do you know how many people around the world look at the London Eye Bridge on the World Wide Presence? It won't be difficult to comprehend what is going on, here."

"Two colleagues who happened to meet on their way to Parliament?" offered Smythe, his pale, white face turning red.

"Two supposedly sworn enemies from opposite political sides, having a friendly chat before I am about to give a major speech."

“Yes, of course, John. Sorry. I only wanted to verify our next meeting.” Abaddon was about to suggest Smythe refer to his persachip, but Smythe didn’t wait for an answer and scurried off the bridge. He took a different, longer route to the Palace of Westminster.

Abaddon walked across the street – the U.K. was years behind in street removals - making a mental note to have Smythe purged from Colony Dominion, and Parliament. Abaddon held a visceral dislike for Barton Smythe. He thought him an opportunist with no real commitment to any ideal. People like Smythe could not be trusted. And his mission was too important to have anyone around him he could not completely trust.

Abaddon was given a wide berth as he walked through the Westminster courtyard. His gait was slow and calm, the steady walk of a man who had a vision for his country as it emerged from a time of isolation and loss. Yet he was also disliked by enough of his high-powered colleagues to worry him. He continued past Elizabeth Tower as Big Ben struck the 10:00 AM hour; the meeting was about to begin. The grey sky was dotted with rain clouds, but rays of sunshine broke through the crevices between the clouds to light Abaddon’s way to the grand double doors. He passed through them as the Queen’s Locale identified him through his persachip.

Even though almost everyone on Earth was now constantly monitored by the Presence, an extra security scan was employed in government and other important locations. The Presence was the successor to the old Internet. 98% of all human beings were connected to the Presence via their persachip. It linked every person, every corporation, controlled every building, every Skiin, every trow pod, and managed entire governments. The Presence tracked the movement of people, places, and things on Earth and, increasingly, in space. Each person or organization also had their own personal space, called their Locale. Your most private information would be kept in the Locale, ensuring personal control over your data...and your life. The Presence and Locale worked together to monitor and manage all human endeavor, from medical and vital statistics to communications to travel to finances. The two, working in tandem, with control of it all from your wrist-imbedded persachip, paid your bills, ensured you didn’t overspend, sent flowers to your mother on Mothers’ Day, kept your children located, controlled manufacturing so that all companies ran on a Just-In-Time system... all human endeavor. Strong privacy laws protected most data, giving 100% control to the individual. Of course, hacking was always a possibility.

Abaddon continued to Westminster Hall. A mechanical floor cleaner made way for him. He entered from the rear of the hall and made his grand entrance up the center aisle, nodding to

his colleagues, friends, and enemies along the way. His opponent was already seated on the dais. John Abaddon liked to make an entrance. He ensured that whenever he spoke, a red carpet was laid up the center aisle.

A smiling nod to his left gave way to a knowing grin to his right, and culminated with a look one would associate with a fisherman gutting his catch. At last he reached the podium and half the room rose in thunderous applause. Abaddon relished it. Raymond Altura, an outgoing member of the House of Commons, introduced him.

“Ladies and gentlemen. For over 15 years I have been proud to know John Abaddon as both a friend and ally. I am here today to welcome him to his first official visit to Westminster Hall as a candidate to be your next Prime Minister and introduce him to those of you not yet fortunate enough to count John as your friend. But that will change when you meet this dedicated, driven man. John has devoted his life to his nation; as Prime Minister he will bring about real change to benefit all. He is a dynamic, loyal, focused, trustworthy, Parliamentarian, with great insight to the problems plaguing our nation. I know that with your support he will be a great Prime Minister. So now I give to you John Winston Churchill Abaddon.”

“Good day. Ladies and Gentlemen, take your seats.”

The applause went on for a full minute as Abaddon stood at the podium and acknowledged his admirers. The room settled down as the last of the stragglers moved toward their seats.

“Good day. And it is a good day for the Empire once again. After suffering through a virus that brought catastrophic ruination, we once again breathe the fresh air of freedom. The quarantine is over and we look to the future. The way is clear...*if* we act with prudence.

Since 2073 our great Empire has suffered. Suffered from a virus we only now begin to understand. Suffered as more than 8 million of our beloved British citizens perished – friends, colleagues, family members.”

Abaddon paused as his throat constricted; he fought tears welling up in his eyes as he thought of his own family’s loss.

“Suffered as our Empire was locked up and locked out, quarantined from fear and ignorance of the virus. And suffered as we watched the world come together without us, stealing our possessions and leaving the once proud British Empire a weak, minor player on the world stage.

“While we were busy with the quarantine, we could only watch helplessly as the 5 Global Sovereigns gobbled up every country they could get their hands on. We watched as the world came together, without us; without Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. We sat idly by as the United States and Countries took advantage of the quarantine to feed its insatiable thirst for power. We watched as the new world order left us to die without hope and without help to eradicate the virus. We watched as our closest ally for over 250 years abandoned us in the name of this new world order. We watched as they stole our very possessions out from under us, leaving our once great, proud Empire in tatters.

“There are those who say we should adhere to the old ways – that we should be happy to get back to ‘normal’. My opponent believes we should continue to suffer the consequences of the last 28 years. Years that resulted in staggering blows to our friends, our families, our economy, our Empire... and threatened our very existence. If we place our future into his hands then I fear it will be impossible ever to pull ourselves out of the miasma.

“Mr. Galbraith has said, “the quarantine wasn’t so bad.” Wasn’t so bad? Does your family believe the quarantine *wasn’t so bad*. If you still have a mother, if you still have a father, sister, or brother, do they believe the quarantine *wasn’t so bad*?”

Abaddon paused, then looked around the hall.

“Do your children?”

His eyes were hard and fixed, his mouth firm and grim. He could see the forlorn looks of loss and despair on the faces of almost everyone in attendance. He saw a Parliamentarian dab at her eyes with a handkerchief, wistfully remembering a husband lost to the virus. Another woman thought of the dozen lost colleagues and her aunt and uncle, who all succumbed to the quick-acting virus. Many had lost children, who seemed particularly vulnerable. None liked to be reminded of the great losses they had endured. A deep anger rose from within and spread across the hall.

Regaining control of his own emotions, Abaddon continued.

“Ask Mr. Galbraith why he believes the deaths of 8 million people don’t really matter. My foolish foe has advocated relinquishing our great Empire to the United States and Countries. Is that the future he sees for our Empire? Is that the future *you* see? Is that the future to which we are doomed? We should walk away from 550 years of history?

“The future I see for our once and future Empire is vastly different from my opponent’s vision of everlasting doom. I see free trade returning to our Empire. I see new mechanicals and



robots arriving to upgrade our manufacturing. I see our health systems restored and thriving as digital humans care for our sick and infirmed. I see an economy where every British citizen will see their universal paycheck restored.

“I want our beloved Empire returned to greatness. We are grateful the 5 global sovereigns babysat our possessions. Possessions such as Montserrat and Cayman were spared the worst. But now it is time to bring them home again, where they belong. I will not sit idly by while greedy governments continue to carve up the world into five pieces.”

Abaddon slammed his fist on the podium.

***“Enough!***

The attendees, even a few on the opposite side of the aisle, stomped their feet in agreement.

“Enough.

“Enough witnessing the annihilation of our once-powerful Empire. Enough sitting idly while the insatiable United States and Countries continues, even today, to expand its borders around the globe...and now even to the Universe as they make a grab for the Moon! Enough watching our once-proud people fold under the weight of the oppression that was the virus. Enough waiting for a shining knight to come along to bring our Empire back...back to its rightful place as the *preeminent power on Earth*. We will be our shining light. We will be our own knights in shining armour!

“I promise you that as your Prime Minister I will reopen our country to new trade, new markets, new possibilities. I will fight for our Empire. I will fight for your families. I will fight for *you*.

“The great Winston Churchill, our great leader and my forefather, said,

*“Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.*

*Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.*

*Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty.*

“I assure you, as your next Prime Minister and your Empire’s champion, I will never give in. I will never give up on our people. I will fight for you and our Empire. We will grow our Empire again. We will show the world how we stand up to adversity. We will rise out of the ashes of the apocalypse. We will become strong again. We will become great again. We will be respected

again. We are the NEW British Empire and we reclaim our rightful place as a leader of all countries on Earth, and beyond!”

The Realists were on their feet. The cheering was heard at the Olde Bannister’s Club a half kilometer away. The other half of the hall, made up mostly of members of the Centurion Party, remained seated and politely applauded.

“God save the New British Empire and God Save the Queen.”

Abaddon smiled. His short, broad nose turned upward. He knew the uphill battle he faced. He had faced them before.

**In 2073 a perfect storm of a deadly virus**, two new technologies, and world-wide fear combined to plunge the United Kingdom into a time of political, human, and economic deconstruction not seen in the world since the fall of the Roman Empire. It would be 28 years before it ended and generations before the country recovered.

Mortiferum, Latin for “deadly”, was a virus that first appeared on the British Isles, but soon spread across the globe. Not since the Ebola epidemic in the previous century had a virus so thoroughly devastated communities. If it spread its infection quickly, it killed even more quickly.

The virus was highly contagious, able to penetrate the skin, making human-to-human contact highly dangerous and undesirable, making quarantine the only method to keep the virus at bay. Once a person was infected the virus could not be detected for two weeks, allowing time for it to spread. It affected most internal organs; the kidneys, liver, and lungs were especially vulnerable. Once the virus attacked, the prognosis for most patients was death, usually within a maximum of three weeks but often merely days. In most cases, only morphine provided any relief at all and even then, very little. Some who died did not succumb to the illness itself, but committed suicide to escape the agony that was described as a fire raging inside their bodies, the result of the virus disintegrating the organs. Doctors could only make the patient as comfortable as possible while they awaited, and prayed, for death. And the epidemic got even worse.

**For generations automobiles** had been the bane of every first-world country. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the air was choked with carbon from over 1 billion vehicles pouring carbon into the atmosphere. Added to that pollution was exhaust from airplanes, busses, and heavy construction equipment, resulting in global warming. The effects were profound, so drastic action was required: by 2045 most countries had mandated electric cars. Although it would take a generation to rid the planet of all of them, the internal combustion engine became all but a museum piece. But then, by 2060, there were almost 2.5 billion electric cars on Earth, forcing urban planners to dedicate up to 55% of land to vehicular transportation in the form of roadways, parking lots, railroad systems, and airports. The “car problem” went from one of pollution to one of capacity. Large metropolitan areas officially declared “permanent gridlock”. Valuable farmland was lost to vehicular infrastructure. Housing prices collapsed as entire populations sought sustainable lives elsewhere. Atlanta, Georgia endured a 25-year economic depression when over 4 million people left their homes and jobs to relocate in the ever more difficult to find areas that

made green living viable. In California there was begun a project to provide rapid transit to every corner of the state, but the massive rail project could not be built quickly enough without bankrupting the state. Los Angeles, where a staggering 24% of land was dedicated to parking spaces alone, suffered the same fate as Atlanta.

As the automobile grew more and more an obstacle to sustainability, the rise of the hoverboard began. Skiins, which did not require paved roadways, became more popular and more efficient for intracity travel. What began as small, single-rider, motor-driven boards on wheels used for recreation by kids evolved into floating hoverboards and vehicles. By 2082 they were an important mode of transportation and, while helping kill off at least one huge industry, birthed others that reshaped how people lived, worked, and played. People who never would have thought to step foot on a hoverboard took to them, affording travel to anywhere in their city quickly and efficiently. Although not a panacea, hoverboards were the solution to many of the problems caused by cars. Some streets and highways became public spaces or were built on. Much needed cropland was returned to farming activities.

The largest hoverboard company was Skiiny Transportation Systems, offering fully automated hoverboards, known as Skiins. In 2084 Ford-GM purchased the Skiiny line, abandoning the automobile. The technology utilized the Earth's magnetism to hover from 5 centimeters to as much as 4 meters in the air. They were lightyears ahead of their old wanna-be wheeled cousins and became wildly popular due to their ability to travel over any surface.

When cars became self-driving, the love affair with the car began to fade. In a generation teenagers began to shun the automobile in favor of Skiins, which provided personalized travel that required no infrastructure and gave them more flexibility and independence. The 'cool' factor was in the boards' plaztik outer shell and its ability to be personalized.

As the Internet evolved into what would become known as the 'Presence', Skiins became a vital mode of transportation. The Presence allowed automated navigation and safety as it monitored and regulated all traffic around the globe.

Ford-GM developed three types of Skiins to appeal to different populations. Individual-use Skiins were small and lightweight and continued to resemble their old hoverboard forefathers. Classic Skiins seated two persons and had a Plaztik outer shell for protection in inclement weather (if one lived in a city not yet environmentally controlled). The Family Skiin seated six and any number of them could be virtually chained together to accommodate large groups, again, all

managed via the Presence. And with the invention of teletransportation, Skiins became the favored mode of transportation for distances under 75 kilometers. For longer distances the world embraced teletransportation.

The Fereday Corporation held the patent for the trow pod. The pods facilitated instant travel around the globe, and once again the way cities were organized changed radically. Teletransportation, or trowing, as it became known, was embraced like no other technology had been before; it, along with Skiins, changed the very fabric of life.

The new technology took advantage of *quantum entanglement* that was first used for instant teleportation of data. Scientists then applied the theory of entanglement to the teletransportation of physical matter. Materials, and later human beings could be instantly transported anywhere on Earth, wherever there were trow pods to maintain the quantum link.

Most countries lacked the resources to take up the new technology as quickly as the United States and, especially, the United Kingdom. The U.K. rushed to place Pods in every nook and cranny of the country. With an initial maximum trow distance of 5,000 kilometers, the world changed as fast as the pods could be manufactured and installed. Politicians in the USC fell back on an old tried and true promise of “a pod near every home”.

Not only did trowing speed transportation, it enabled humankind to experience places once only written about in Science Fiction novels. A resort was built under the Caribbean Sea. A restaurant, *Elon's Space Diner*, was placed in orbit 22 miles above the Earth. Now anyone could do a morning ski in Zermatt, or take an afternoon walk along The Great Wall of China. One could have lunch at the Café des Artistes at the Louvre, do a little sight-seeing, and be back home in Indianapolis before the kids finished their schoolwork. The pods also advanced the ability and desire to explore the Universe. Fereday's subsidiary, Fereday Space Corporation, bragged that their trow pods would jump-start the colonization of the Moon, which had failed so many times before. They did.

However, like any technology moving too quickly to market, trowing's problems soon raised their ugly heads. The largest and most devastating was trowing's inability to filter, or even detect, bacteria and viruses.

At the same time the world embraced Skiins and trowing, the Mortiferum virus began to spread. The virus, Skiins, and trow pods acted upon human kind in a perfect storm of cause and

effect. Skiins and trow pods brought the world out of its holo-roomed homes, making for more human-to-human contact at almost exactly the same time as the virus took hold.

The United Kingdom suffered the highest numbers of infection, with more than 20% of the population diagnosed in the first six months of the initial infections. Doctors were at first unable to explain the high infection rates. Then, after a year-long investigation, *The United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases* discovered that trowing strengthened the virus and made it more contagious. The virus incubating in a person teletransporting via a trow pod was not only more virulent, but trace amounts remained in the pod and active, and would infect the next person to use the trow pod.

As millions of people died in the United Kingdom, countries around the world joined in the effort to stop the virus, giving rise to the Global United Front which, until that point, had been a small, ineffectual organization of representatives from a handful of world governments that had for many years warned of the dangers of implementing new technologies too quickly. When the link between the Mortiferum virus and teletransportation was discovered, the Front, with its I-Told-You-So attitude, grew in size and influence. Backed by the United States, the Front publicly insisted on a quarantine. Fear and misinformation led people outside the British Isles to believe a quarantine was the only way to ensure the virus did not spread around the globe. But many inside the Commonwealth did not agree, arguing that an isolated and weakened British Empire would be less capable to confront and defeat the virus. They blamed their own British government for bowing to what was still known in those days as the United States of America, which insisted on a quarantine of the U.K.; every member of the Front agreed. There was debate and rioting as people took to the streets to stop what they believed was their country's death knell. They were right. Frightened Brits did not understand how a quarantine of an entire nation made sense, or would be effective; many economists, doctors, and politicians agreed. But in the end it was the voices of 12 billion people around the world, in opposition to 72 million citizens of the British Isles, that won out.

A weak King Charles IV advocated for and signed the quarantine decree. His Prime Minister went along with the king; they assured a divided Parliament that the quarantine would last "only six months, at the longest". It became a 28-year ordeal.

Many of those who fought against the quarantine took things into their own hands and attempted to escape before the quarantine. Some got as far as Belgium, France, the Netherlands,

while others made it to the middle-east and as far south as Africa and even Australia. As usual, the wealthy were able to buy their way out. Others commandeered trow pods to escape, but they were located by the Presence and forced to return by governments frightened they would introduce the virus to their countries.

As the British Empire staggered and shrunk under the weight of the quarantine, the United States took the opportunity to expand its borders. In 2091, 3 months after King Charles, himself, died of the virus, the U.S. became the United States and Countries, or U.S.C, as it brought countries around the world under its flag. In only 15 years the U.S.C. added Sobhi (formerly Iraq), Nigeria, North Korea (parts of which would not be habitable for another 125 years), Belize, The Baltic Corridor, which is made up of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, the Philippines, Cuba, and Panama Island (the parts that were still dry after global warming flooding). As other nations' governments nervously watched the expansion of the U.S.C., they quickly joined the trend to become larger, more powerful nations. They, and the U.S.C., became known as *The Five Global Sovereigns*, which included *The Chinese States*, *The South American Nations*, *The African Nation*, and the *EuroZ*, which was made up of all the former European Union nations plus Belarus and Turkey. Islands and smaller countries not included in a Global Sovereign were considered territories or protectorates of the Sovereigns and India came late to expansion; it would be another 18 years before it became the sixth Global Sovereign. A handful of nations remained semi-independent, entering into treaties with one of the 5 Global Sovereigns, who provided economic and strategic protections.

Russia, as always, was a country that continued to reject democracy. Russia's government fell in the 2030's after a failed attempt at world domination which very nearly triggered World War III. But the ever-aggressive nation had by then ruined its economy and its leaders pocketed billions of rubles; it could not sustain a combat campaign. In the 2060s Russia's land mass began to shrink due to global warming. The country turned to conquest in Europe, which resulted in isolation and repudiation, even by the Chinese States. The country would struggle to restore some semblance of an economy, to feed and clothe its people, and to find its place in the world, for the next century, which, ironically, shielded its people from most of the ill effects of the virus.

On a rainy Tuesday in 2073 the quarantine began. Borders were closed, trow pods in the U.K. were placed in storage. Only a few ships were allowed to stay in operation; the remaining were placed in dry dock or sent abroad. All exports were banned and imports of vital food and

medicines were allowed to be thrown to a dozen, closely guarded troop pods. A radio force-field circled the British Isles to prevent anyone escaping and possibly taking the virus with them. The Presence kept close watch. When someone attempted to exit or enter the British Isles, the presence embedded in their wrist as an infant would inform the Presence and Quarantine Police would return them to where they belonged. Some people were allowed into the country - if they had good reason - knowing they might never leave. Some decided it was better to be together to face the virus than to live without their families, friends, or loved ones.

By the time they got the virus under control, it had exacted a terrible toll upon the once mighty British Empire. Trade was virtually eliminated. Poverty rates skyrocketed as businesses shuttered. Crime rates soared, birth rates plummeted. The government was forced to stop issuing universal paychecks as the digitals that provided the productivity to fund the government broke down, ensuring manufacturing all but ceased. Human labor was re-implemented, but three generations of digitals performing most physical work had left the population ill-prepared for manual labor.

The writer E.K. Eades wrote:

“The British Empire, which once boasted of 53 possessions around the world and an economy the world’s envy, now stands like a beggar on the street. I fear we never again shall see our precious Empire, which has survived world wars, famine, and political upheavals, rise to the position it once so proudly held when we spread our ideals of Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation throughout the lands. We turn to divine providence for comfort and, should it be His will, to answer when we bid, ‘God save the British Empire’.”



Ben emerged from the trow pod located in front of the concert venue in Huntington on Long Island, the new heart of the financial world after parts of Manhattan went underwater due to the rise in ocean levels. Even though the domed venue protected concertgoers from the rain and cold, Ben looked up at the September sky to take note of the weather – still warm with the full moon reflecting its bright light off the white clouds. It was 19:54; “Robert should arrive any moment”, Ben thought. He had not dated much since he and Noah broke up, and so he was feeling a bit nervous. A hovering vending mechanical stopped in front of him to entice him with curried seaweed, roasted mixed nuts, ice cream, or a flavored water, all offered with or without ‘Mary Jane sprinkles’. When Ben did not respond positively, the digital vendor moved on.

Ben took a moment to check his mail, then called up the Presence News. He expressed a story about the progress being made on Atlantis City, then came across an item about a missing person whose body had been found three weeks after having disappeared from a work site. Ben was interested in the story until it mentioned the missing person was a woman. “Good,” Ben thought. “It isn’t Bill Renders.” Ben didn’t pay much attention to the rest of the story, which said that authorities in multiple countries were investigating a spate of disappearances around the world, with most occurring in the United States and Countries.

Ben was facing the trow pod when its door slid open and a couple in their mid 40’s stepped out, dressed for, Ben guessed, the concert, she in a purple plasztik skirt and white blouse, he in plasztik jeans, striped shirt and beige jacket. She apparently changed her mind about her skirt; she spoke to her persachip and had it change the color to navy blue and lengthened it four centimeters before they passed through the entrance gate. Ben turned back to check for Robert, who had already exited the pod and was approaching him.

“Hi. You’re right on time,” Ben said. They gave each other an awkward, first date hug.

“And you didn’t end up in Huntington, West Virginia,” Robert said with a devilish grin.

Ben raised his left wrist and said, “Thanks to modern technology.”

“Shall we go in?”

“I guess we better, the concert should be starting.”

They approached the entrance gate and Robert’s persachip communicated to the venue’s Presence Locale his pre-purchase of two concert tickets. The plasztik doors blocking their entrance opened.

As they made their way up the ramp to the venue, holographic arrows appeared before them, pointing them ahead, then left, then right, and marked their seats with a star on each. They were seated in the first tier above the floor of the venue, dubbed by locals *the fleapit*. Robert liked the view afforded by the higher elevation.

“Did you eat? I can get you a chingel burger, if you’re hungry.” Robert asked.

“I had a big lunch in Mexico City,” Ben responded. He was touched by Robert’s concern; his heart may have skipped a beat. “Maybe we can grab something after the concert?”

“Perfect,” Robert said, looking at Ben.

Ben couldn’t stop staring at Robert. His sapphire-blue eyes glowed with an intelligence behind them that Ben found even more attractive than his sharp facial features and thin, toned body. It had been a long time – if ever - that he felt such instant attraction to, and rapport with someone. It made him a little sad that he had taken so long to start dating again after Noah. He tried to make small talk.

“So this is my first Peyton concert.”

Robert kept his eyes on the stage area, where there was a pre-concert holo-video Save of the cellist playing in Budapest. “This is my eighth.”

“Wow, you’re really a fan.”

“He can make that cello sing,” he said, turning to Ben. “You’ll see.”

Ben draped his arm across the back of Robert’s seat.

The pre-concert concert ended and the house lights dimmed as the stage lights came up. Lysander Peyton strolled out onto the stage and sat on a padded stool next to his resting cello as the concert-goers welcomed him with a long, loud round of applause. He extended his arms out toward the audience; it was his signature welcome. The audience responded in kind. The enthusiastic crowd seemed thrilled to be able to catch the cellist on one of his last tour stops prior to his announced retirement.

The stage backdrop was a constantly changing holographic flyover of some of Earth’s most beautiful locations, including the towering Swiss and Italian Alps, the blue Maroon Bells in Aspen, the stark-white structures of Santorini in Greece, and Croatia’s Plitvice Lakes, all places Peyton had played concerts.

Peyton addressed the audience. “Thank you for coming tonight, to hear some of my favorite pieces. I hope that when our time together has ended you will find yourself changed, in some way, as this music has changed me and informed my life. I offer it to you with respect, and love.”

He began the concert with *Cello Suite No. 1*, by Bach. Almost immediately Robert relaxed into his seat. He closed his eyes and allowed the familiar melody to permeate his being to whisk away the cares of the day. Being able to share it with Ben was an added treat.

After Peyton’s fourth number, Ben stopped staring at Robert and he, too, relaxed into the music, adopting Robert’s peaceful posture. The concert was a mix of traditional and classic pieces interspersed with newer music from recent history. One memorable new piece was inspired by the U.K. quarantine. In its haunting strains Ben could hear the anguished cries of victims succumbing to the virus’ torturous effects. He found it particularly moving.

Peyton played four encores before the raucous crowd would even consider allowing the concert to end, by which time Robert had taken Ben’s hand. He squeezed it with each final few notes of the modern cello piece, *In Praise of Humanity*, by Stjepan Hauser, former half of the famous 21<sup>st</sup> century cello duo, *Two Cellos*. Then Peyton strolled stage left, turned, held out his arms again, and disappeared into the wings.

Ben and Robert exited the *fleapit* and walked to no place in particular. Robert said, “I wish I could play the cello.”

“It’s never too late to start,” Ben said, his eyes wide with encouragement.

“Not just that instrument, *any* instrument. I tried the piano and the violin; they were both a disaster. I had too many distractions. What about you?”

“Nope. Nothing.”

Robert nodded his head in realization. “Of course. You were probably a jock.”

Ben became a bit defensive. “Jocks play music! Besides, how do you know I was a jock.”

Robert stepped aside to look Ben up and down. “Look at you. You don’t get to look like that by playing music six hours a day.”

“I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted.”

“Take the flattery,” Robert said. He cupped Ben’s neck with his hand and squeezed.

“I think I’d better.”

Robert looked around to get his bearings. “Hey, I know a place near here that is supposed to have the best Sushi. Supposedly only real seafood, nothing from a factabratory...do you know it?”

Ben half-sang, “If you knew sushi like I know sushi, oh, oh, oh.” Robert only looked back at him with a blank stare. Ben wondered why he’d done that. He then said, “Sushi sounds great.”

They walked to the sushi restaurant, *A Melange*. The restaurant interior was modern, with lots of plasztik used in the stark white ceiling and comfortable sofas lining one dining area, and in the periwinkle flower bar top with hovering barstools. Looking around the restaurant Ben and Robert noticed several people on holographic dates, couples, foursomes, one group of 12 dining together, and a few families. One little girl was coaxing her father into trying octopus. The aroma of cucumber and watermelon hung in the air.

The digital host greeted them and showed them to a table in the sofa and upholstered chair section. They sat next to each other on a sofa with a dining/coffee table in front that slid close to them when their food arrived. Robert ordered Hamachi and Uni while Ben stayed close to his favorites, California Rolls and Tori.

They ate their fill, enjoying sake along with dinner. The sake loosened things up and got them both talking.

“So,” Robert began, “you’re from Spokane.”

“Spokane?” Ben was lost a moment, then said, “Oh! Spokane. My sister...no, I’m from St. Paul. My sister moved to Spokane when she got married.”

“Are your parents still in St. Paul?”

“I moved them to Key West four years ago so I could visit them more often. Mom has Binary-Alzheimer’s.”

“Binary-Alzheimer’s. That’s gotta’ be tough,” Robert said.

Ben took a sip of sake. “It has been...but mostly on my father. He’s been there for my Mom from the beginning.”

“Since they developed a cure for Alzheimer’s I thought we’d have a cure for Binary-Alzheimer’s by now.”

“Mom was diagnosed 24 years ago, before much of the progress that’s been made. And Binary-Alzheimer’s functions quite differently in the brain than Alzheimer’s.” Ben wanted to change the subject; he wanted this night to be a happy one. “What about your folks?”

Robert said simply, "They died when I was 14."

"I'm sorry, Robert."

"It's okay. I have a sister that stepped in and raised me. She saved my life."

Considering the perfunctorily way Robert reported the death of his parents, Ben chose not to pursue the whys and hows. He also decided he'd had enough of death talk and did not ask Robert about his marriage. "So how long have you been with the government?"

Robert said, "Fourteen years. Five at the DOJ and the past nine in Geographic Development."

"You sound like a 'lifer'."

"I think I am."

"I thought I would be, too. But it didn't turn out that way."

"Yeah, why'd you leave the State Department? From what I gather you could have written your own ticket."

Ben found himself wanting to open up to Robert. "I became disillusioned. Which is nothing new for me. I've left quite a trail."

"Disillusioned. How?"

"None of my jobs were able to hold my interest. I guess I have a 'been-there-done-that' feeling after a while."

"How many jobs have there been?"

Ben realized he might come off as non-committal, unable to stick to much in life. But Robert needed to know who he was. He forged ahead.

"In college I was pre-med. I was determined to cure my Mom. Then after college I was recruited by Special Forces."

"Special Forces! Wow. Special Forces."

"Then I was given a position with the State Department, and now I'm with Fereday. See? Can't sit still long enough to make a difference."

"You liked Special Forces." It was a statement rather than a question.

Ben smiled. "Yeah, that was pretty special. I made some great friends. And I actually did feel I was making a difference."

"So why did you leave?"

“I didn’t, exactly. There was a mission to Sobhi, before it was Sobhi, but it needed to be undercover. So they invented a special office for me at State so I could complete our objectives.” Ben stopped a moment, looked at Robert, and said, “I’m not supposed to be telling you this.” He gave himself a mental shrug, then continued. “After that I was named Ambassador and spent the next three years bringing Sobhi into the U.S.C. I kinda’ got stuck at the State Department.”

“Some place to get stuck.”

Robert noticed how Ben sat up in his seat and held his head a bit higher when he spoke of his days with Special Forces. “So why didn’t you return to the Forces?”

“Seemed like they had passed me by. Seemed like it would have been taking a step backward.”

“So now you’re working on Moon City. That’s exciting.”

“I guess.” Ben slunk back into his seat once again. He reached with his chopsticks, grabbed a California roll, and plopped it in his mouth.

Robert said, “Well, there’s nothing in my life that exciting.” He looked at Ben and thought, “at least, not until today.”

Ben said, “You told me you’re working on Moon City, too?”

“Yeah, just the contracts. But you...you’re right in the middle of it. You go there often?”

“About once a month. You? Ever been?”

“To the moon? No. I’m miffed about that. I’ve always wanted to go. Maybe when it’s finished and inhabited. How long will that be?”

“Maybe a year, if all goes well.” Ben could see the excitement in Robert’s eyes when he spoke of going to Moon City. “You should go.”

“I would love to.”

“Okay, we will.” Ben called up his calendar, which appeared before him. “Let’s see, how about next August...the 24<sup>th</sup>? The dome should be in place by then.” Ben was pretty certain this relationship was going to last – at least until August.

“I would love that.” But doesn’t it take like seven days to trow to the Moon?”

“Nine.” Ben then spoke lower, almost a whisper. “But we’re in the final testing stage of the new, upgraded trow pods. I’ve been trowing there in a little over an hour...just two trows... and I come back the next day.”

“Really? I thought that technology was still way out in the future.”

“Fereday’s not releasing the new pods until they are 100% certified, which should be less than a year. But we’re using them now. Saving us a bundle in time and money.” Ben sat back upright. “I would love to take you there.”

“It’s a date.”

“Great! We can trow to Moon City, stay overnight, and I’ll show you around. On the way back we can stop for dinner at Elon’s Diner.”

Robert smiled at Ben. He felt like a schoolboy. “But I think I need to see you again before then.”

“You will, if I have anything to do with it.” Ben felt he could fly to the moon all on his own.

After dinner Ben and Robert continued walking and talking. They passed the old Whaling Museum, which was being converted into apartments, and walked to the end of the cobblestoned walkway, what used to be Main Street. Neither wanted the night to end.

At about 1:30 they approached a trow pod. Ben said, “Thank you for the concert. I enjoyed it more than I expected to.”

“He’s got a way about him.”

“Next time we’ll go listen to some Space Framing.”

Robert did not care much for Space Framing, but said, “I’m game. And next time, dinner’s on me.”

“Maybe I’ll cook, next time. What’s your favorite food?”

“Italian.”

Ben’s heart skipped another beat. “Italian? My specialty...and my favorite, too. We need to go to Les Marches.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that on Tuesday.”

“I’ll show you my favorite place on Earth.”

“Promise?” asked Robert, smiling.

“Promise. And I always keep my promises.”

Ben moved closer to Robert and kissed him. Robert took Ben’s face in his hands and kissed him back. After several seconds they broke the kiss and hugged. Robert felt comfortable and protected in Ben’s arms. Ben thought to himself, “This is completely right.”

They broke their hug; Ben stole another kiss before Robert entered the trow pod. He said to the pod, "USC144, Chevy Chase, Maryland." The trow pod repeated his destination. Then, he locked eyes with Ben as the trow pod door closed. A moment later the pod reopened, empty. Ben stood several moments and went over the evening in his mind. He looked up at the moon-lit sky and watched the clouds as they were gently blown out to Long Island Sound. He felt warm and peaceful, as if he had discovered a missing piece of himself, as if his life was about to change. He entered the pod and transported home.



Queen Elizabeth II is no more than two meters from Ben, sitting at her usual place in Buckingham Palace. She wears a blue silk tulle dress, with star-shaped embroidered flowers, and a chiffon drape. Her pinkish cheeks are iridescent in juxtaposition to her white hair. This would be her last speech given before her public.

“Each Christmas, at this time, I have broadcast a message to the people of the British Empire in all parts of the world, and I have continued this tradition while I have been fortunate enough to sit in this chair, at this same desk used by my father during his own speeches to you. My father, and my grandfather before him, worked all their lives to unite our peoples ever more closely, and to maintain the ideals which were so near to their hearts. I have striven to carry on their work. My hope is that you have benefitted from my efforts. This year I would like to begin by extending my heartfelt thanks...”

Ben tried to focus on the speech, but his mind was more interested in his own, upcoming speech.

As her speech concluded and Elizabeth II’s hologram faded back into history, Ben turned to the two Parliamentarians that accompanied him through the museum. “I read the Bitterman biography on Elizabeth. She was something.”

“Yes”, said Sarah Brigwell, Parliamentarian from Sheffield Hallam, an all-but-forgotten district that suffered greatly during the virus years. “If only she’d been queen during the virus crisis. I think her steadfast leadership would have made a difference.”

Brigwell’s colleague, Sean Bukhari, raised both arms to indicate the museum as he said, “Yes, well, the museum certainly puts Elizabeth in her best light, but not everyone blames Charles for our plight.”

Bukhari was speaking of King Charles IV, a great-great grandson of Elizabeth II. History blames Charles IV, who ruled from age 17 when his mother, Charlotte I, abdicated the throne. “Charles ruled for 28 years; he died on the throne of the virus. Many feel his weak leadership, allowing Parliament to run roughshod over his decisions, allowed the U.S.C. to bully Britain into the quarantine. “But”, Bukhari continued, “we can agree to disagree.”

“We always do,” replied Brigwell, with a wide grin.

With a holo-room in most every home, museums barely existed as physical locations. From a holo-room, a visit to any museum in the world was only a persachip request away. The Queen

Elizabeth II museum had been built 50 years earlier. When holograms became ubiquitous, much of the museum was converted to meeting space for those who still found they needed to meet in person. Government entities were usually the facilities' clients; diplomacy often still required face-to-face negotiations.

As the only museum visitors, Ben and the two Parliamentarians were free to speak openly. Ben wished to move the conversation to the sub-committee meeting they would all attend that afternoon in the adjacent hall.

“So what can I expect today? Is the Commonwealth ready to join the U.S.C. on the moon?”

“We are”, said Bukhari.

Brigwell shook her head in agreement. “Most definitely.”

“But”, said Bukhari.

Ben thought to himself, “There’s always a ‘but’”.

“It won’t be a Skiin ride. There is strong opposition to the agreement. In fact, there’s strong opposition to having anything whatsoever to do with the U.S.C.”

Ben had hoped to hear differently, but he was well-aware how a sizable portion of the British Commonwealth felt about the U.S.C. He had experienced some of it first-hand when he was with the State Department. “They still blame the U.S.C. for the quarantine? It’s been almost 30 years!”

Bukhari continued. “Yes, but we only just came out of it last year. Many feel that this offer to participate in Moon City is only a way for the U.S.C. to get its hands on our country. We don’t want to become the next fallen nation added to the U.S.C.”

Ben stiffened. “You know that is not what we want.”

“How do we know that? We thought you were here on behalf of Fereday, not the State Department.”

“I am here on behalf of Fereday, but you know I work closely with State.” Ben felt deflated. It seemed the State Department was always getting in his way. He held his head up so as not to give himself away. “We need the State Department in order to lock things down, legally, and protect both our positions.”

Brigwell and Bukhari were Ben’s strongest supporters of the U.S.C.-U.K. Moon City governing body. He counted on them to tell him like it was – especially Bukhari.

Ben said, “I appreciate both your support. Without you this agreement would be dead in the water. John Abaddon is not going to be my biggest fan, I fear.”

“John Abaddon is no one’s fan. Don’t let him try to intimidate. We need this agreement to pass,” said Brigwell. “It is vitally important for Fereday and the British Commonwealth to work together to show solidarity – to show our two nations still share an indelible bond.”

Ben continued, “We feel the Commonwealth’s future is dependent on the Moon City Agreement being a success. President Mintier wants to include Britain in the project to quell some of the ill feelings still held for the U.S.C. by the Commonwealth..and I agree. This agreement will give you the global shot-in-the-arm you need, coming out of the quarantine.”

Ben hoped that it would also help make up for some of the mistakes made by the U.S.C. regarding the British Commonwealth. But he kept those kinds of thoughts to himself.

Brigwell spoke up. “You need to assure them that Fereday will be in charge. Any whiff of the U.S.C. government stepping in will put an end to the agreement.”

“You realize, of course, that your own government will be involved?” Ben’s eyebrows raised as he looked for signals that they understood the irony.

Bukhari’s head fell backward; he looked to the ceiling. “We understand what we’re asking, but it hasn’t been the United Kingdom who has trotted around the globe, taking every available country in its nation-building efforts, which, excuse me, continue to this day. To make this work, the U.S.C. government must stay out of it. People are still quite angry.”

Brigwell continued, “And John Abaddon is your strongest rival on this, have no doubt. If Abaddon will not support it, then Britain will be out. He usually gets what he wants.”

Ben thought back to his days with the State Department and his meetings with Abaddon. He knew he was a formidable opponent – indeed, he had always had negative feelings about the man - and had tried to get on Abaddon’s good side. “This is a win-win for both sides, surely he will see that.”

“John Abaddon wants what is best for John Abaddon. If there is nothing in it for him, he cannot see what is in it for Britain.”

“Then we’ll have to assure him there is something in it for him.”

Brigwell’s face went a bit pale; she feared Abaddon. “Ben, don’t underestimate the lengths to which John Abaddon will go to protect his interests.”

The museum's next presentation began. Suddenly they were standing on a cliff, overlooking the Lake District. Laid out below them was a fertile, green-blue valley with several streams running along, all converging at Lake Buttermere. The sun shone down the valley, enhancing the rich colors; a Golden Eagle soared across the sky. A narrator began the presentation. "This is one of Elizabeth's favorite views in all of Great Britain..."

"See that!", Ben exclaimed, pointing to the bird. "That eagle can only be a sign of a great cooperation between our nations."

Bukhari looked at Brigwell, then with a sigh, said, "We'll know this afternoon."

Ben sat at a table near the bar in a pub named *The Crown*. There were many pubs in England with that name; this one was located in Paddington, northwest of downtown London. The black onyx bar stood in front of a deep-red wall with three very large mirrors lined with bottles of whiskey, rye, scotch, and other assorted liquors and liqueurs. A video screen displayed a news item about a famous international singer. He had disappeared while on tour six weeks earlier; he still was missing.

A woman approached Ben. The fact that a real, human waitress arrived at his table to take his lunch order supported Ben's view that the United Kingdom was woefully behind in most every area of modern life. There was a noticeable lack of mechanicals, robots, and digital humans in the U.K.

With her lace-up bodice, skirt tucked up into a large belt, white blouse, money pouch for tips, boots and three pairs of frilly bloomers, the waitress could have stepped out of a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting, several of which were displayed on the walls.

"What'll you 'ave?"

"Shepherd's Pie. I've not had a good one since, well, you know...the quarantine."

"I 'ear that a lot. Don't you Yanks 'ave any decent chefs over there?"

"Yeah, but there's just something about a good Shepherd's Pie made right here in good old London town. At least, that's what I've been told all my life."

"Something to drink, darlin'?" The waitress's blond hair was precariously piled up on her head, threatening to let loose at any moment.

"Do you have a good premium bitter?"

"Boddington's. You'll love it."

"I'll have that."

Ben looked out the bar through a window that perfectly framed the *Marble Arch*. He thought about his upcoming presentation and how important it was that the bill should pass.

After lunch Ben paid his check, then went out the heavy wood doors facing Hyde Park, on the opposite side of the Arch. The air was damp with a hint of coming rain. The dome that would soon be raised over the city would make weather concerns moot, a God-send in damp, perpetually rainy London. The dome would not, however, do much to mitigate the flooding in South London, making much of it uninhabitable.

Ben decided to walk to Parliament. That way, he reasoned, he could make a few calls on his way and get some exercise at the same time. He entered Hyde Park through the Marble Arch and into an expanded portion of the park, on land that used to stretch from the park to the former A501. The London City Council had funded a bird sanctuary and located it in this newest portion of the park to coax quarantine-traumatized Londoners out of their homes. Sitting on the sanctuary's lawn one could picnic while enjoying the sights and sounds of Robins, Goldfinch, Doves, and many more typical British Isles species.

Ben turned a corner past the sanctuary to see two men attempting to capture a man in a grey suit. The man in the suit was about 50 and slightly overweight. He struggled against the two men, who easily overcame him, knocked him down, and tied his hands behind his back with digital handcuffs. The men then wrapped his wrist with a tin and aluminum foil bracelet to mask his persachip signal. They picked the man up and began carrying him to a nearby trow pod.

Ben was only a few meters from the trow pod himself, and ran to it to intercept the men.

Ben shouted, "Let him go and step away."

The two men ignored him and continued toward the trow pod. Ben got to them before they reached it. He grabbed one of the men, spun him around, and cold-cocked him with a single blow to his face. The man dropped to the ground. The other man then let go of Mr. GreySuit and pointed a black, tubular device at Ben and pressed a button. Nothing happened. By that time Ben had reached the man and tackled him to the ground. The man fought back; he was quite powerful and Ben ended up on the ground beneath the man. He choked Ben and shoved his knee into Ben's ribs. He could feel the pressure and feared he might snap a rib bone. The man put more and more pressure on his chokehold. Ben shot his hand up and smashed the man in the chin, but this did not seem to faze him; he brought more pressure to bear on Ben's now constricted throat. Ben's Special Forces training kicked in. He brought both arms down and under the assailant's two arms and with all his strength smashed the man's arms up and away from his body. Before his assailant could recover, Ben reeled his right hand back, made a fist, and smashed the man in the nose. The man was momentarily knocked back; blood ran down his face. Ben then grabbed his would-be murderer's right arm and twisted it back and out, forcing the man to turn with his back to Ben. Ben then flipped himself up on his knees and twisted the man's arm even further until he was face down in the grass. The man recovered a bit and turned himself over and up. But Ben was ready for him and hit him hard in the nose. He quickly pulled his fist back and smashed the man's face again.

The man's head hit the ground and he fumbled for Ben's arm as he tried to sit upright. But Ben was already releasing another blow to the man's face, and hit him three more times until the man dropped, unconscious.

Meanwhile, the other man was staggering to his feet. He grabbed the black device and ran into the trow pod. Ben knew it was no use chasing him as he would be gone in mere seconds. Indeed, the trow pod doors reopened; the pod was empty.

Ben returned his attention to the second man. But before he could reach him a Police Skiin arrived with two officers. They picked the man up and deposited him in the rear section of the Skiin. Ben shouted to the police. "Hey! Aren't you going to help this man?" They paid no attention to him. The Skiin took off toward the South.

Ben then helped the attacked man up off the ground.

"Are you alright?"

"Can you get these off me?" The man said, referring to the digital handcuffs.

"I'm afraid I don't have the code," replied Ben.

Around the corner came another Police Skiin, blasting its two-toned siren. Two more officers exited the Skiin.

"We received a notification from the Presence that a man's persachip stopped reporting. What's happening, here?" said one of the officers.

Ben said, "This man was attacked by two men. They tried to take him away."

The man said, "And this gentleman jumped in and stopped them. Can you get me out of these?"

While the second officer released the handcuffs, the first officer asked for Ben's identification. Ben said to his persachip, "Send my identification to..." Ben looked to the officers to fill in the missing information.

"Hyde Park MPS 488."

Ben repeated the police officer's identity code and his persachip sent Ben's identification to the Metropolitan Police Service database for verification. Instantly Ben's identity was expressed to the officers.

The second police officer said, "Benjamin Barnett, with Fereday Space, formerly with the U.S.C. State Department. Mr. Carico here is lucky you came along when you did. Where are they?"

"Who?" Ben asked.

“The two attackers you spoke of.”

“One escaped in that trow pod. The other was taken away by the first Police Skiin”

The first officer looked at the second. “First Police Skiin?”

“Yes. Two officers took the assailant away.”

“We’re the first to arrive.”

“No, there was another Police Skiin. They arrived, loaded the man into the Skiin, and headed South.”

The second officer relayed this information to the Police Station at Hyde Park. They responded that there was no other Police Skiin.

“Can you come to the station and make a report?”

“I’m sorry, officer. I have a meeting with Parliament in about an hour. But I’ll contact you just as soon as it’s over.”

The officer looked doubtful, but then a message came through on his persachip confirming Ben indeed had an appointment in Parliament. “Very well, Mr. Barnett. Can we give you an escort to Westminster Hall?”

“Thank you, but I’ll need to change clothes before the meeting. I’ll call for a Taxi.”

The man, who Ben now knew was named Carico, approached Ben and held out his hand to shake. “I don’t know why you did what you did, but thank you.” Ben did not respond but simply shook the man’s hand. The man said, “If there is ever anything I can do for you, I do hope you will call on me.”

Ben’s persachip expressed to him the man’s contact information he had just forwarded to Ben. Ben said, “You’re with Scotland Yard?”

“I’m in Presence Reckoning,” Carico said.

“Well then, your attackers have some interesting days ahead of them, I suspect.”

“They can count on it.” The man picked up his hat, brushed himself off, and removed the signal-jamming bracelet from his wrist.

“Do you have any idea why you were targeted?”

The man did not answer Ben’s question. He only said, “Again, I am forever indebted to you.”

“I’m only glad I could help.”



The Police helped Carico into the Skiin, then they headed toward the Hyde Park Station to the West.

Ben bought a bottle of water from a digital vendor and requested a TaxiSkiin, which took him to the nearest haberdashery for a change of clothes. He then walked to Westminster Hall, all the time thinking about the assailant and the two apparently fake policemen.

The Select Committee on Space and Technology shuffled into the room, which was formerly the biography room of *Elizabeth's Castle Museum*. Ben turned his nose up to sniff the air; the room smelled of wet fur and deteriorating concrete. The committee consisted of six members of Parliament, three from the House of Lords and three from the House of Commons, and chaired by John Abaddon.

A presentation sent to the committee by Fereday Space began playing. Thousands of brightly lit stars filled the holo-walls. The brightest star was, of course, the Sun. Stars changed position and the Earth grew smaller and smaller as the presentation depicted a journey from the Earth to the Moon.

Ben and his small delegation were already seated near the head of the long, oak table. As the committee members arrived, Ben put down his speech notes to greet them.

Offering his hand, Ben first approached a Parliamentarian from the north he recognized. "Jemma Tors. I'm Benjamin Barnett with Fereday Space. We're hopeful of your support today."

Tors responded guardedly, shaking Ben's hand while sneaking glances at the door to see if John Abaddon had yet arrived. She noticed Ben's hands; his skin was broken and peeled. "Not your typical diplomat", she thought, then focused her full attention on Ben. "We're quite open to hearing what you have to say about the joint agreement, although you must be aware we have already heard from some of our constituents."

"I hope," said Ben, clasping his hands together, "that whatever you have heard, you'll give our project a fair hearing."

"That's why we're here." Tors smiled at Ben, looked around the room, then proceeded to her seat at the table, all the while stealing glances toward the entrance.

Ben tried to make a good impression on each committee member. He knew he would need the committee's unanimous support to get the United Kingdom on board with Moon City. He approached the final arriving member and, again, offered his hand. "Hello, Teri, how have you been?"

"Ben! How nice. How are you?" She took Ben's hand in both of her's and gave him a warm greeting. "It's so good to see you, again." Teri Bristow was a seasoned diplomat; nearly everyone she met liked her.

Ben liked her, as well. He said, “I haven’t seen you since Sobhi. When did you return from Paris?”

“When the quarantine ended I moved back home.”

“How’s Tess? Still in the honeymoon phase, I trust?”

Bristow turned a bit red, embarrassed that Ben knew she had gotten married again, because she knew nothing of Ben since Sobhi, except that he now worked for Fereday Space. “She’s the best thing that came out of Sobhi...at least, for me”, she said laughing. “We both made it through the quarantine unscathed.” Bristow had volunteered to leave the U.K. in the middle of the quarantine. She completed many successful diplomatic missions, attempting to maintain the U.K.’s hold on wavering possessions nervous about the Brits’ ability to support and protect them. Her diplomatic work propelled her to a seat in Parliament.

“Glad to hear it. That was an awful time for the United Kingdom...for all of us.”

Bristow then noticed Ben’s damaged hands. “Ben, what happened to you?”

“Just a little scuffle in Hyde Park. It’s nothing.”

“Were you attacked? Did you contact the police?”

“It’s all settled,” he lied.

As they each headed for their seats, Bristow said with a laugh, “We need to get you a bodyguard.”

John Abaddon waited to make his entrance until all committee members had been seated, including Sir Thomas Morell, who attended the meeting via hologram. Abaddon threw open the door, which banged against the wall and caught everyone’s attention. He marched to the head of the table at the opposite end of the room, greeting each member if not by name, then with a smile and a nod. An assistant followed him into the room and joined other Parliamentary employees seated along one wall.

Abaddon stood 5’9” tall. His nose was wide; his mouth was small. He almost puckered when he spoke. His lean frame was the same as it was in high school, and he moved with a former wrestler’s gait. However, his reddish-brown hair had prematurely retreated, the few wispy hairs remaining combed over the top of his head, giving him a slightly sinister aspect. Abaddon relished the diffident looks his hair elicited.

Even in this less public sphere, Abaddon wore his “Churchill outfit”, as his wife used to call it. He strolled to the head of the table and immediately slapped the gavel down. The room

went silent and in an instant all attention shifted from whatever business each member was discussing, to Abaddon. Ben was wide-eyed at Abaddon's ability to galvanize a room.

"Good afternoon, everyone. This meeting of the Queen's Committee on Space and Technology is assembled. Today we will hear from..." Abaddon looked to his holographic notecards, pretending not to remember Ben's name. "...Benjamin Barnett of Fereday Space, with whom I understand some of you have already met." Abaddon gave Sarah Brigwell and Sean Bukhari chastising looks. "Mr. Barnett will present the United States and Countries' Moon Colony project, which, as House Bill 31 states, attempts to include the British Empire as..."

Abaddon again paused, then looked to each member with his infamous *fisherman's glare*. A Parliamentarian once said that John Abaddon "stared down opponents with the look of a fisherman gleefully gutting his catch".

"...as a Moon City governing partner *aside* the United States and Countries." Abaddon took pleasure in any despotic characteristic that added to his image of an imposing and feared man. Three Parliamentarians looked down to avoid eye contact with him; the remaining three looked him in the eyes. Abaddon smiled a bit; he could see in the members' faces who was with him and who was not.

Ben could almost feel Abaddon's intent; his mouth dropped slightly open and he sat stiffly upright, girding himself in preparation to mix it up with not only Abaddon, but his followers.

"So without further ado, we welcome Benjamin Barnett."

Ben rose to shake hands with Abaddon, whose hold was unyielding. His vice-like grip was telling and Ben didn't like the vibe he was getting. He attempted to end the handshake, but Abaddon clenched it tighter, drawing Ben's hand toward him with a sharp jerk. He had shaken the hand of many people during his career; Abaddon's was that of a controlling, phobic man attempting to hide it by asserting dominance.

With Ben's hand still in his, Abaddon pulled Ben close and said, "You might bring your brawling to Hyde Park, but don't think you'll get away with it in here." Abaddon then smiled and sat. Ben was thrown off-kilter much less than Abaddon had hoped.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ladies and Gentlemen of Parliament, thank you for allowing me the chance to speak with you today on what I am certain will not only prove to be a fruitful partnership for both the Commonwealth of Nations and the United States and Countries, but will

play a major role in restoring the Commonwealth to the respected status it enjoyed before the quarantine.”

Upon hearing his British Empire referred to as the “Commonwealth of Nations”, the union’s legal name, John Abaddon stiffened in his seat. His head cocked left as he kept his eyes on the floor. Abaddon only ever referred to his nation and its dependencies as the British Empire. It once had been an empire that boasted of 53 possessions, and it would be an empire again if he had anything to do with it. That Ben had downgraded it to a simple commonwealth enraged him. He was convinced that this agreement to ‘share’ the moon was nothing more than a land grab by the U.S.C. aimed at getting hold of Great Britain. If Abaddon was against the Moon City agreement before, he was determined now to quash it.

As the holographic presentation continued, Ben gestured to the Moon, growing larger and larger. “As you know, humans have been traveling to the moon for more than 130 years, and we have had many mission successes. But past attempts to establish a permanent colony on the moon have been met with many obstacles, not the least of which was the time and cost it took to transport people and supplies.”

As Ben continued, the Moon City presentation went dark for a moment. Then, hovering above the meeting table was a three-dimensional representation of London from 10 miles above the city. The perspective moved down to city level, then to a gleaming, white trow pod tucked in the corner of a small park. The pod door opens and we enter. The door closes as a voice says, “Take me to Moon City”. A few seconds later the door reopens and we step out into another small park. Children are playing in the park as a small waterfall churns gently in the background. Beyond the park are modular apartments, three stories high. Each has a balcony and atop each building is a green space with park-like settings. Some have vegetable gardens while others sport fruit trees and flowers. Above it all are stars, the Sun, and our Earth. It is a city on the Moon, protected and environmentally controlled by a transparent dome reaching 10 stories high.

“But now, with the latest Fereday Space teletransportation technology, we will establish Moon City, where eventually up to 3,000 people will live. Visiting the moon will soon be as easy as visiting Chicago or Los Angeles...and just as fast. Current trow pod distance limits are 20,000 kilometers. As we are limited to two trows per day, that means trowing to the Moon currently takes 9 days. But in the next year Fereday Space will unveil the next generation trow pod, advancing the

trow distance to 200,000 kilometers. Imagine trowing to the Moon in just over an hour, and returning the next day if you so desire.”

The presentation displayed a restaurant floating in space inside a clear plaztik sphere; the whole thing looked like a giant snow globe suspended in the cosmos.

“Fereday will place a way-station halfway between the Earth and the Moon. Here travelers will be able to spend their hour between trows by having lunch or dinner at *Arthur’s Earthlight* Restaurant, then continue to Moon City. You can live on the Moon and visit folks back home on Earth without the need to waste three days inside a cramped space jet. As a matter of fact, space jets to the Moon will become all but obsolete.”

The presentation continued its depiction of Moon City. In one area was a public swimming pool with an ocean-wave simulation and several water slides. Alongside the pool was a picnic area with people grilling and playing. Two Moon Huskies, a new dog breed, ran across the park.

“The United States and Countries has granted Fereday Space a partnering agreement, and we would like for the Commonwealth of Nations to join us in the governance of Moon City. Additionally, all subsequent colonization of the Moon will fall under this agreement, ensuring the Commonwealth of Nations will be directly involved in future Moon colony expansions. Fereday Space believes the Commonwealth can offer unique perspectives and bring significant experience to the role of governing a satellite nation. We see this as an opportunity for the Commonwealth of Nations to move beyond the quarantine, and to demonstrate to the world – the universe – that the Commonwealth is capable, powerful, and confident.”

Abaddon remained outwardly calm, but inside he seethed each time Ben said “Commonwealth of Nations”.

“The entire agreement is laid out in your House Bill 31, of course, but allow me to mention a few specifics. Moon City will function as an independent state. The governing body will include a Governor, who will manage the larger issues and act as liaison to the two national governments. An aldermanic board will oversee local issues. All governmental positions will be appointed in the first five years, then move to an elective model. In order to facilitate fair and equitable representation, an electoral system will be established, giving the U.S.C. and the Commonwealth one vote each. The U.S.C. will have no governing authority in the first five years. Thereafter Moon City will have one Senator elected to represent the U.S.C. and one member representing the Commonwealth in the House of Commons. We hope you can see the benefits of this historic

agreement and that we can count on your support for House Bill 31. I'd now like to answer any questions you may have."

The Moon City presentation faded and the room lights brightened. Almost every member had their hand raised to chest level, with one finger pointing skyward. John Abaddon sat calmly in his seat without raising a hand.

Ben first acknowledged Teri Bristow. She threw him a softball.

"Mr. Barnett, how long before the new pods are in place and people actually begin moving to Moon City?"

"Ah. A very good question from the Honorable Lady. Infrastructure is mostly completed. We expect the new trow pods to be in place within eight months. After that, we could see our first permanent residents living in Moon City in about a year."

Sir Thomas Morell, the committee member attending via hologram, asked, "How much will the establishment of the City cost, and what portion will be the responsibility of the U.K.?"

Ben was beginning to relax, again. It appeared to him that the committee was genuinely interested in the agreement. "As I'm sure you can imagine, shuttling supplies and materials by space jet has proven to be time-consuming and expensive. Once the upgraded trow pods are in place, costs will be reduced by 80%, which is a game-changer. Future upgrades to the city will be no more expensive than infrastructure costs for any other environmentally-controlled city on Earth. But to answer your question, the cost to the Commonwealth will be solely for support of its own representatives. All other costs will be borne by Fereday Space for the duration of its current 50-year contract."

Ben looked around the room for more questions. He thought he had made it through the gauntlet unscathed. Then, John Abaddon pointed a finger upward. All other hands went down. Ben hesitated, then acknowledged him.

"Chairman Abaddon."

"I have a few concerns. What can you tell us about the future safety of Fereday's *new and improved* pods? We don't want another viral infection to run rampant."

"Viral safety is paramount in our minds at Fereday. We have incorporated viral alerts into trow technology; at present, over 300,000 virus forms known to man are recognized, with more added every day. If the virus cannot be filtered during transportation, the pod will at least send an alert and log it so it can be addressed. The new pods should be completely safe."

“That is what we heard 29 years ago.” Abaddon was keenly interested in this point. “How can we know it will work?”

“We have run numerous and rigorous tests to ensure that what happened all those years ago can never happen again. In fact, very soon the pods will perform bio-filtering at the destination side of a trow. Bio-filtering will not only ensure bacterial safety, but it will facilitate elimination of many body infections, including some of the more virulent forms of cancer.”

Abaddon did not show it, but he was alarmed to hear about the bio-filtering feature of the new pods. If it worked, bio-filtering would throw a wrench into his plans. “So, you talk of the miraculous healing powers coming our way, but we have experienced the failure of pod technology first hand, and it all but destroyed our Empire. I don’t believe you can assure us that the new pods will be 100% safe.”

“Without saying too much about what is coming in the future, I can assure you that Trow technology is the safest form of transportation in the history of the planet. I bet my life on it every day.”

“We all do, Mr. Barnett. But getting back to your proposed agreement: What assurances will we have that the U.S.C. will not interfere with the governing of Moon City? And why is the U.S.C. so determined that the British Empire play a part? I’m certain you can see how we would all be a bit skeptical, what with the history of the Empire being shut out of previous U.S.C. global expansion efforts.”

“And there it is”, Ben thought to himself. “The John Abaddon I was warned about.” Ben looked around the room and tried to discern how committee members felt about Abaddon and the agreement. “Those are honest and fair questions. I think we can all agree that the U.S.C. has already relinquished governing interest in Moon City. The 50-year contract with Fereday Space ensures that Moon City will be home-ruled and independent. At the end of the contract it is expected that the U.S.C. will take up the slack left by Fereday’s eventual exit. By that time the Commonwealth will have firmly established itself as the primary governing body on the Moon.”

Abaddon broke in. “Yes, well, we all remember how the contract the U.S.C. made with Morse Medical was quickly ripped up once the virus was declared an epidemic.”

Ben felt this was a completely unfair and illogical accusation. Morse Medical had collapsed due to the overwhelming strain caused by the virus epidemic. There remained no contract to



enforce, and so the U.S.C. had moved to take over and do what it could to slow the virus that was killing millions.

“I understand your concerns,” Ben said. “That contract collapsed of its own weight. In this circumstance...”

“And let us not forget the Sobhi debacle. When the agreement with Sobhi did not live up to expectations, the U.S.C. promptly cancelled it and left the struggling nation high and dry.”

Sobhi annexation had been Ben’s project. It was true that the first U.S.C./Sobhi agreement collapsed, but, again, Ben felt that the accusation was without merit. “Again, thank you for giving me the chance to explain that situation. When the former Iraqi government collapsed, the U.S.C. was forced to abandon the agreement. Not a year later we entered into a new agreement with what is now known as Sobhi, and we shut down a dangerous uprising. I think we can see that both those agreements were cancelled under extraordinary circumstances.”

Abaddon would have none of it. “I think we can see that the U.S.C. has a history of backing out of its promises. But that is neither here nor there. What we cannot understand is why the United States and Countries is so interested in partnering with the British Empire on the Moon. Isn’t it your usual way to just take what you want?”

“The U.S.C. always strives to function with fairness and impartiality. We want what is best for all parties. We have our hands full at the moment, but there is nothing stopping the U.S.C. from establishing the moon colony all on its own. We want to show the Commonwealth of Nations, and the world, that as you emerge from a difficult period, the U.S.C. is committed to continuing our 250-year history of cooperation and friendship. The U.K. represents our roots. We share a common ancestry. We share a common language. We share common goals. We wish to continue that friendship and to forge new worlds together.”

Abaddon looked to his colleagues and saw that Ben was gaining ground. “Mr. Barnett, we were under the impression that Fereday Space, not the U.S.C. government, was calling the shots, here. But you speak of the U.S.C. government being ‘committed’ to helping the British Empire. ‘We share a common ancestry, we share a common language, we share common goals.’ It sounds like the U.S.C. wants its *share* of our very Empire!” Ben began to respond, but Abaddon continued. “You come here saying you represent Fereday Space, but you speak for the U.S.C. government. So please tell us, who is it you are actually representing?”

Ben felt as though he was falling off a ladder. “I work for Fereday Space, but I have been authorized by the U.S.C. government to make certain promises...”

“Authorized?! You have been authorized by the U.S.C. government? So you are working on behalf of the U.S.C. government and you come here today to lure us into an agreement with the power-hungry U.S.C.? And at a time when we are at our most vulnerable!”

Ben tried to regain his footing. “Naturally there are certain aspects of any agreement on something as important as the moon colony that the U.S.C. must be involved. But that doesn’t mean...”

“Certain aspects?” John Abaddon had a way of using his opponents’ own words against them. “Naturally the U.S.C. is involved. Why wouldn’t they be?” Abaddon looked out to the committee members. “And when the British Empire is inextricably tied to your nation, which continues gobbling up any and every country it can get its hands on, then this largest of the five Global Sovereigns will fold our nation into the obscene concoction that is the United States and Countries. Thank you, Mr. Barnett, for your kind offer, but I, for one, will pass.”

Ben stood motionless at the head of the table. Abaddon continued. “Are there any further questions?” Abaddon looked around the room at the faces of committee members. Some sat on his side of the aisle in Parliament, others sat on the opposite side, but at this moment, all knew better than to challenge him. “Thank you for being here today, Mr. Barnett. It’s been very enlightening. We’ll make our recommendation to Parliament next week. This Parliamentary Committee on Space and Technology is adjourned.”

When the room emptied, Ben sat alone for a few moments, looking at the Moon City presentation on the walls. He felt like he had been in another fist-fight. He understood why the quarantine continued to loom so large in the minds of the British people, but he did not understand why they now refused the help they had so vocally solicited. He wondered how this would all look in his report to the State Department.

Ben took a TaxiSkiin to the Hyde Park Police Station. The Skiin stopped in front of the aluminum- and glass-front building and Ben hopped off as his persachip confirmed the taxi payment.

Inside the police station Digital Humans performed most administrative tasks, interviewing witnesses and suspects, accompanying perpetrators to the holding cells, keeping coffee-drinking humans' cups filled. A mechanical washed windows as a DH greeted Ben.

"How may we help you, Mr. Barnett?"

"I'm here to make a report about an incident that occurred yesterday in Hyde Park."

"One moment, I'll contact Officer Blair. Have a seat."

Ben sat in one of a dozen plasztik chairs lining one wall of the station. He had only just sat down when Officer Blair approached him.

"Mr. Barnett, thank you for coming in."

Ben stood. "I said I'd make a report about the incident..."

"Ah, yes, the attempted kidnapping in Hyde Park yesterday. You can make a report, but we've actually closed that case."

"Really? So you caught the perpetrators?" Ben was surprised things had moved so quickly.

"Yes, sir. We were able to arrest the two men responsible."

"Two? There were four men."

Officer Blair re-expressed the report. "Yes, we arrested all four men."

"And Mr. Carico?"

"Mr. Carico is just fine."

"Good to hear. Will you need me to testify?"

"I don't believe we will, Mr. Barnett. We have plenty of evidence on them from this and previous crimes. They'll be going away for a long time." Officer Blair threw out his chest with pride. "With their arrests we've solved about two dozen kidnappings that have taken place around the globe in the last year or so – many of them in the U.S.C. The Prime Minister has declared 'case closed' on all of them. It's all on the Presence News."

"I'll take a look." Something didn't sit right with Ben, but he couldn't put his finger on just what was wrong. It all seemed too neatly tied up all too quickly. Ben offered his hand to the officer. "You have my contact, if you need me for anything, just let me know."

The officer shook Ben's hand. "Thanks. We will." Officer Blair then walked back to the rear of the police station.

Ben went over the events of the previous day. He wondered why the four men had targeted a technology expert from Scotland Yard – surely there were Presence experts available outside a law enforcement agency. And if they needed Carico to manipulate the Presence for them, who had they been relying upon for that in the past? Ben also thought the kidnapping itself was handled very clumsily, almost as an afterthought. He wondered what bothered him about it. Finally, if those four men were responsible for kidnappings all over the world, why target not only government employees, but also people of note. Were they trying to make a statement by targeting certain people? Why were no non-celebrities or government officials taken? Ben left the police station with more questions than answers. 'Case closed'? he thought to himself. "I think not."

Ben sipped his morning coffee and watched a Key Deer wander through his back yard. This one was obviously pregnant; she would probably give birth next month, in April...or perhaps May. The species had approached extinction 75 years ago, but was now vigorously protected in its sole habitat on Big Pine Key, most of which survived the nearly 12-inch sea-level rise by 2100. About 25% of the island had been purchased, one lot at a time, by The Nature Conservancy, back in the 1990's, and held in trust in perpetuity, all to protect the small deers' then-dwindling numbers. Although controversial at the time, the project became a model for protecting animal species. Governments and other private entities copied the model around the globe, resulting in the successful repopulation of numerous species.

The little deer stopped to nibble on some Indian Mulberry lining Ben's yard, then moved on and disappeared into the brush. Ben returned his attention to the Presence News. Just as he was viewing a vid about the United Kingdom rejecting the U.S.C. offer to share in the Moon project, a call came through. Sarah Brigwell's image appeared before him. Ben was still wearing shorts and was shirtless from his morning workout. He said to his persachip, "Work clothes mode", which signaled his persachip to superimpose a white dress shirt and slacks over his image. The persachip then brought up Brigwell's live connection.

"Hello, Ben."

"Hi, Sarah."

"I guess you've heard about the outcome of the bill?"

"I have the vid up, now. Tough Day."

"For all of us. Parliament is so short-sighted. They either won't see what that project could mean for Britain, or they really are still that angry."

Ben rubbed the back of his neck. "A little of both, I suspect."

"John Abaddon was a big factor. I don't know how, but he definitely holds sway over many members."

"Yes, well, it was clear at the meeting that he was taking no prisoners."

"Perhaps we can try again later."

Ben's DH glided in and began cleaning the room. "I'd like to think so, Sarah. We can give it another shot, but for now the Commonwealth will be shut out of the Moon, and perhaps even Mars."

“Oh, Ben, I hope not. There aren’t many places left in the world for us to go.”

“You can thank John Abaddon. What’s his beef?”

“He puts a lot of pressure on members. He’s relentless. He clearly has something in mind. I’m getting a whiff of something going on with him, and it doesn’t smell good.”

“Oh? Perhaps he wants to be King of the World.”

“Don’t laugh.”

Out of the corner of his eye Ben saw the little deer approach his window and push its nose against the glass. The protected animals had no fear of humans.

“Sarah,” Ben said. “what does Abaddon want, ultimately.”

“Well, he’s always talking about bringing back the Empire. It’s a pipe dream, but when people are hurting they can be very vulnerable to a populist making outlandish promises.”

“And yet, the Moon City agreement would bring more power to the U.K.”

Brigwell frowned. “That’s why I say he’s got something up his sleeve. His rejection of the bill doesn’t make sense. I’m going to dig around and see what I can come up with.”

“Let me know if you find anything.”

“Of course. And you’ll do the same?”

“Perhaps we can do something from this side. But I gotta’ tell you, the Administration is getting tired of trying to placate Great Britain. Someone needs to do something about *whoever* is throwing the wrench into the workings.”

“We’re trying, Ben, we really are.”

“I know, Sarah. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Bye, Ben.”

Ben took a final swig of his coffee, which was constantly monitored by his persachip and kept at a perfectly drinkable 55 degrees. As he placed the empty cup down on his desk, his DH arrived to take it to the kitchen, wash it, and put it away. Ben stretched his arms as Robert came into the room.

Ben said, “Looks like you won’t have to bother with those Moon City agreements. Parliament rejected the Bill.”

Robert was dressed for work in a blue shirt and beige slacks. “So I heard.” Robert bent down and kissed Ben’s neck. “You did your best.”

“I hope that’s not my best.” Ben rose and wrapped his arms around Robert. He smelled shower-clean with a faint aroma of cologne. “Are you leaving now? Take the day off. We could pick up Dad and go to *Italia! Italia!* for lunch.”

“Can’t, today.”

“You know, if you moved in we could be together more than once a week.”

“You know how I feel about that. I want our next step to be more formal.”

“Oh? Have something in mind?”

“Keep the 23<sup>rd</sup> open.”

Ben grinned and said, “Calendar entry: Thursday, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, Dinner?...” Ben paused and looked to Robert for a confirmation. Robert nodded his head ‘no’, but would not elaborate. “...*something* with Robert, end entry.” Ben’s persachip confirmed the appointment. “Well, I guess I should look for a new suit.”

“I guess you can wear a suit to a hockey game, if you wish. Personally, I was hoping we would be wearing Seattle jerseys, especially if we want to say hello to your old college friend, Tim Foster.”

“A hockey game! I haven’t been to a game in over a year. But I doubt a big hockey star like Tim will remember me...especially after 14 years.”

“We’ll see,” Robert said, with a sly grin.

Robert gave Ben a kiss. “Well, I have to go. What are you up to today?”

“Meeting with Maria Verdugo at State. A debriefing about the great, failed meeting with the U.K. Space Committee last week. Good thing I wanted out of government, because they certainly wouldn’t have me back, now.”

“Do you want to go back?”

Ben looked out the window again, watching the wind move through the trees. “No...no. Not to State. Well, you can’t really go back, anyway, can you?”

“You can do anything you want.”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it, knowing what you want.”

Robert had noticed a restlessness in Ben since their first date. “Tell me, right now...don’t think about me or your mother, just tell me what *you* want.”

Ben thought back to his days in Special Forces. He was constantly reliving counterinsurgencies and international defense missions. But he did not share them with Robert; he only answered, "I want NOT to fail at my job."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Sounds like that committee's decision was made before you were even invited to speak."

"Yeah, but Abaddon hated me. He was even more choleric than I remember. I mean he *hated* me."

"You worry too much. No one hates you. As a matter of fact, I *love* you."

"I love you, too." Ben kissed Robert and they hugged for a few moments, Ben rubbing Robert's back. "I want this every morning."

"Soon." Robert broke their embrace and gave Ben another quick kiss. "See you in a few days."

Ben watched as Robert entered the trow pod and the door closed. He made a point to call his sister and thank her, once again, for that fateful lunch invite last Fall. A moment later, the empty pod's door reopened. Ben smiled and wondered why he was so lucky to have found someone who believed in him the way Robert did. "Perhaps," he thought, "I'll finally figure out what I want." He stood in front of the pod, slightly shaking his head.



Despite the Harry S. Truman Building having been recently renovated and tripled in size, Ben's nostrils filled with air that was sharp and acrid, like an old museum packed with decaying, stone artifacts. To Ben this was the smell of government: stale, dusty, ancient. He never enjoyed being in government buildings, but he was anxious to complete his debriefing of the U.K. committee meeting.

He walked a long corridor, arriving at an intersection with a colossal arched window looking out on, thanks to the elimination of C Street, an expanded Kelli Park. He turned left and continued toward the offices of the Secretary of State. The corridor holo-walls were lively with presentations of State Department accomplishments and news. Past Secretaries of State photos scrolled through one area. In another a video of Secretary of State Maria Verdugo presented her recent visit to The China States, where the talk was of a joint venture to locate and explore a habitable planet similar to Earth. The Chinese American relationship was the strongest it had ever been; China was now as close to the U.S.C. as the United Kingdom once had been.

Ben approached Verdugo's outer offices. Recognizing Ben, the door opened automatically. The outer office no longer contained a human administrative assistant; a DH stood at the ready to make guests feel comfortable waiting to see State Department officials or even the Secretary herself. Ben did not have to wait. The DH announced, "The Secretary will see you now, Mr. Barnett. Please proceed through the double doors"; it gestured to them and they opened.

Maria Verdugo's office was carpeted and there was a seal of the Secretary of State in the center. Verdugo's large desk was flanked by two, new U.S.C. flags, with 13 stripes, 51 stars in the upper left corner representing the 51 states, and an American Bald Eagle in the center, grasping 19 twigs representing the countries that were now a part of the United States and Countries. A white plasztik trow pod sat in the corner opposite the doorway.

Verdugo emerged from the trow pod just as Ben entered the office. An assistant entered from a rear office door and stood near the desk. He said, "Welcome back, Madam Secretary."

Ben stood in front of her desk as Verdugo crossed to Ben. They shook hands.

"Ben. So good to see you again. Thank you for coming."

"I'm glad to be of service." Ben winced slightly at his formality with Verdugo. He had known her for over 10 years and they had worked closely on many projects, so they were old friends, but Ben's diplomatic training kicked in.

Verdugo asked, “How are your parents? How’s your mother doing?”

“They are hanging in there. I do my best to see them whenever I can, now that I’m more settled.”

“Settled? I hear you are anything but...running to Atlantis City and, now, Moon City? Doesn’t sound like someone who has slowed down any.”

“Fereday keeps me busy, but I like it that way.”

Verdugo crossed the room to sit on a sofa. “Please, Ben, sit down.” She motioned for Ben to sit in a wingback chair, one of two facing the sofa. Ben crossed to the chair, waited for the Secretary to sit, then took his seat. Ben would have liked to talk more – about their work in Sobhi, Nigeria, China – but he knew how tight the schedule of a Secretary of State was.

“So”, Verdugo began, “your meeting with the Technology Committee has not borne the fruit we had hoped.”

“I’m afraid not, Madam Secretary.” Ben squirmed a bit in his seat.

“We seem to have an enemy heading up that subcommittee.”

“John Abaddon, yes. He was dead set against this cooperative agreement before we even met, I’m convinced.”

“We need to find out what is going on in the minds of Parliament.”

Ben nodded. “I don’t know what insight I can provide about our meeting other than what you see on the vid, but there is definitely something going on, there.”

“Well, John Abaddon is only one of our worries. Our relationship with the U.K. has been sour since the quarantine. We thought that once it ended we would be able to restore relations, but that hasn’t been the case. That committee was only one stop on our mission to offer an olive branch to the United Kingdom.”

“They do not seem to want to take up that olive branch.”

“That’s why you’re here. We want you to head up an office on U.S.C./U.K. relations.”

Ben squirmed a bit more as Verdugo continued. “A strong United Kingdom is in our interest, and a strong relationship with the U.S.C. means a strong United Kingdom. We need someone who is also strong, and experienced, to find out who is blocking us over there.”

Ben placed his hands on his legs and sat up in the chair; he raised his eyebrows and his eyes grew wide. “I thought I was here...” Ben looked to the U.S.C. flags; he thought that the Eagle

grasping the twigs representing the 19 countries was the perfect metaphor. “Madam Secretary, I am flattered by your offer. But when I left State, I was certain it would be final.”

“You did some of your best work while at State. Now I’m offering you the freedom to conduct your department however you like. And you’ll have my complete support.”

“Again, I appreciate your confidence in me.” Ben chose his next words carefully. “I’m not a private investigator. I can’t help feeling that this would be closer to espionage than to diplomacy.” Ben understood the need for intelligence gathering; he just preferred direct action, himself.

“Now Ben, you completely discount your days in Special Forces. That training, along with your diplomatic skills, is the blend we are looking for.”

“I’m afraid my Special Forces days are long gone.” Ben turned his head and looked at the gleaming trow pod in the corner. He wondered why he felt the guilt of a liar.

“Don’t shy away from your accomplishments during that time. I have your file in my Locale.”

The Secretary nodded to her assistant, who brought up a map of the world in front of them. The five Global Sovereigns and their possessions were each a different color; the U.S.C.’s were in blue.

“So here is the current world map. As you can see, the U.S.C. has possessions in strategic positions around the globe, except for Northern Europe. We need a strong relationship with them to ensure our security in Europe.”

“I see their importance, Madam Secretary. I’m just not the person you should be asking...especially after assuring Parliament that our motives were strictly deferential.” Ben waited for a reaction from Verdugo on his hint at his, and the U.K.’s, betrayal. “There are so many talented people in State that would be better suited to this mission.”

“Ben, your work on Sobhi is still the standard for bringing a country around to being part of the U.S.C.”

It sure sounded to Ben like she was talking about making the U.K. another U.S.C. possession. “Thank you. I had a lot of help.”

“Nonsense. I was there. I know what you pulled off. You dug down until you found the people standing in the way of that agreement and you got them out of our way. And you performed with singular focus. That is what we are asking for you to do now.”

Ben didn't know exactly what he wanted to do with the rest of his life, or at least not ready to admit it if he did, but he knew he didn't want to spend it in diplomacy.

"With all due respect, Madam Secretary, I like my job with Fereday. I'm working on exciting projects I never thought I would have a chance at."

Ben realized he was lying – to himself – but thought of Robert and the life he was moving toward. If there was one thing he was certain of, it was that he wanted his life to include Robert.

"I like my life." Ben paused a moment, then said, "And, if I may be frank, I'm not completely sold on the idea that the U.S.C. should continue its aggressive expansion activities."

"That's not how we see this. The quarantine brought to a screeching halt any plans the United Kingdom had of expanding its reach. They are now very vulnerable and are struggling to recover; they're ripe for the wrong people to take advantage of them. And you can see that the British Isles in the hands of the wrong country could affect the security of the U.S.C. We are offering them protection while preserving their heritage. Nothing will change for them...except that now they can rejoin the world."

"Sounds like it will take some time to pull it off."

"This is a two-year mission, at most; we hope we can wrap this up in six months. After that, if you wish, you can return to Fereday. I have your boss's assurance."

Ben felt a jolt move through his body, but outwardly, managed to remain calm. "You've spoken to Norberg about this?" Ben was beginning to understand how much they wanted him.

"Your job will be waiting."

"But I'm in the middle of the Moon project." Ben was now thinking out loud. "It's at a critical stage of development that would suffer greatly if it changed hands."

"Nothing in your life will change. And you can add another feather to your cap. You will be able to write your own ticket."

The doors then opened and former President Andrew Montgomery entered. Ben and Verdugo stood.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Welcome, Mr. President," Verdugo said as she shook his hand. "You're right on time for a most timely and dramatic entrance."

Ben shook hands with Montgomery; he was feeling a bit overwhelmed. Montgomery took a seat in the wingback chair opposite Ben's.

Andrew Montgomery stood 6'1" tall. His handsome features, which had helped propel him to the Presidency, were beginning to fade. His hair was quickly turning gray and he looked more ashen than Ben had remembered. But he still retained the youthful energy he had when President during Ben's State Department days. Ben greatly admired him and considered him a friend. He thought Montgomery's presence was a bit of overkill. He wondered if Verdugo might pull Ben's own father into the meeting to convince him to accept the job.

"How have you been, Ben? I hear your life is about to change in the best way. Robert Conner is a good man."

Ben remained standing while the two conspirators sat.

"You know Robert?"

"Oh, yes. He never let me forget to dot an "i" or cross a "t". He's quite the stickler for details."

Ben was now feeling more than a bit overwhelmed. He felt that this was a full-on assault. President Montgomery motioned for Ben to sit.

"Yes," Ben faintly replied, "he won't let you get away with anything." Ben felt the whole world knew Robert, and wondered why he hadn't before they met at the Mount Everest Café.

"Bart and I will have you both to dinner, soon."

Verdugo spoke up. "I've been trying to convince Ben to rejoin us here at State."

"This is quite an opportunity," said Montgomery. "But I know how much you are enjoying your position with Fereday Space. I understand you are in line for a top position on the Mars project."

"Moon City has been my singular focus and will continue to be. I don't look too far into the future." Ben looked down to the floor; he was doing a lot of lying, today. The truth was Ben always felt a strong need to know where he was heading. He was goal-oriented; he divided his life into five-year plans, which had worked for him quite well. (So why did he feel unsettled? Perhaps it was the goals that were the problem.) Five years in Special Forces, five years at State, and now he was in the second year of his current five-year plan. He had modified that one to include Robert. He couldn't see himself moving backward, revisiting the past, despite how loudly his subconscious screamed.

"And we have assurances that just as soon as this U.S.C./U.K. issue is settled you will return to Fereday and continue your work."

Ben felt it was time to be firm. “Mr. President, Madam Secretary, I am flattered and cannot tell you what your support means to me...” Ben looked to Montgomery. “...always has meant to me. But there are other issues in my life I must consider, and returning to State at this time would not be the best decision...for me or the country.”

Montgomery looked to Verdugo, who pursed her lips. He said, “You must do what you feel is best, of course. No matter what you decide, you know *I am always on your side.*”

Ben turned his head to the left and inwardly laughed. Here was this great American leader who Ben admired more than anyone he had ever worked with, using the campaign slogan on him that got the guy elected President. He turned back to face Montgomery. “I have never felt otherwise, Mr. President.”

Montgomery stood. “I miss our days working together. We accomplished some great things.”

Ben and Verdugo also stood. He and Montgomery shook hands. “It was an honor to serve under you, Mr. President.”

“Just don’t write us off right away...give this some thought. And if there is anything I can do, you’ll let me know.”

“I will, sir.”

Verdugo interjected, “And if you change your mind, you’ll let *me* know.”

“And I meant it about that dinner with Bart and me. We’ll be in touch.”

“We look forward to it.” (He was speaking for both himself and Robert, now?)

Ben watched as Verdugo and Montgomery exchanged good-byes and she walked him to the door. He rubbed the back of his neck as he wondered why he had so vehemently rejected the offer to return to the State Department. After all, that is where he performed some of his best work...well, there and at Special Forces. Or had he only *enjoyed* his work at Special Forces more? If anything, Ben felt more unsettled after the meeting. Something pulled him to his past; he just couldn’t put it all together, yet.

“So what are you up to, today?”

Ben always sat taller whenever he was with Robert. Robert’s hologram was *sitting* on the park bench just to Ben’s right, which was the only way he could have lunch with Robert on this day; Ben had one hour for lunch between meetings. He signaled for the food cart. Above him appeared a holographic advertisement for the latest Skiin from Ford-GM, touting its ability to *travel faster and further to get you there when throwing can’t*.

“I’m kinda’ miffed. I just found out I have to go to Havana in a couple of weeks to deal with the Cuba agreement”, Robert said.

The food cart floated to a stop in front of Ben. A holographic menu appeared before him with images of the cart’s offerings. As Ben turned to peruse the menu his persachip communicated his likes and dislikes to the food cart so it only displayed items Ben might be interested in.

Robert continued. “Seems there’s a small problem with some verbiage in the documents the President signed last year. He’s worried they may have an “out” in the future if they ever feel the need to secede.”

Ben quickly returned his attention to Robert. “This won’t affect our plans, will it?”

“Don’t worry. Italy is still on. If I have to, I’ll trow to Havana for the day and return that evening. Nothing is going to stop me from marrying you.”

“Nothing better.” Ben turned to face the food cart, quickly scanned the menu, then ordered the #4. “I’ll have the Crystal Burger and Curly Zuks. The burger is a Chingel burger, right?”

A voice from the food cart said, “Of course, sir, 100% lab-grown beef, as well as the Zuks. Each burger is grown in our factabratory in Detroit...”

“Thank you, I’ll have that.”

Ben wasn’t exactly fond of the Chingel burger, but with the food shortages of the last 30 years due to the near-elimination of beef cattle, chickens, and hogs as one way of counteracting climate-changing carbon build-up, lab-grown meats were just about the only protein option (unless you wanted to get your protein from a powder).

Ben returned his attention to Robert. “I wish you could join me for lunch...for real. You could be here in two minutes.” Ben looked to the holographic menu, pointed to an item, and tried to entice Robert. “They have our favorite stew, just like we had at the Everest Café...”

Robert corrected him. “The *Mount Everest Café*. I wish I could, but I’m meeting with Administration staff on this Moon deal. I’m halfway to the White House.”

The doors of a trow pod near Ben opened and a man in a gray suit exited and looked around for a place to have lunch. Soon the entire area would be crowded with luncheoners. Crystal City was the epicenter of government workers from almost every department; government work was one of the areas of human activity still mostly performed by humans.

At noon doors opened and hundreds of people scrambled for their place in the park-like setting that was the new Crystal City. Skiins of all kinds whizzed across blue-green lawns and ponds and sidewalks. More food carts appeared to serve the ever-growing number of customers. As people ordered, robotic arms prepared the orders, then served them in quick succession.

Ben bit into his burger. “Give the President my regards.”

“I will, because, you know, the President and I are like *that*.” Robert held up his hand and crossed his first two fingers. He thought a moment, then said, “I wish you would reconsider coming to work for him. He really admires your work with the State Department.”

Ben squirmed in his seat as Robert continued. “We could live here and have lunch together every day...well, most days.”

“Robert, I would love nothing better than for us to spend more time together, but I’m done with diplomacy. I don’t like some of what we’ve been doing these past few years and I don’t want to be a part of that.” Ben could not look Robert in the eyes when he said, “Besides, I *love* my job.” He wondered if Robert noticed the overly emphatic way he said “love” that completely gave him away as a liar.

“Just know you have an ally in the White House...a pretty important one.” Robert looked to his right, then turned back to face Ben. “Well, we’re here...gotta’ go.”

“What time will you be home?”

“Sorry, I can’t trow home tonight...I have to make three trows tomorrow.”

“Three?” Ben thought of Noah and the effects over-trowing had had on him. “Robert, that’s pushing it.”

“I have to. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Robert’s image faded away. Ben looked around as more and more bureaucrats lined up at various food carts, or sat on benches to eat their lunch; some sat on plasztik mats and picnicked on the gourmet spread their digital humans delivered. Just two miles in any direction a late-winter



storm had dumped 12 centimeters of snow on the ground, including the White House and most of D.C.; but recently domed Crystal City enjoyed year-round Spring.

The man in the grey suit was sitting on the next bench; he noticed Ben.

“Ben! Want some company?” He rose to join Ben on his bench as if it were a foregone conclusion.

Ben looked up to recognize a former colleague from his State Department days.

“Brook!” Ben rose to shake hands with him, deftly juggling his lunch. “How have you been?”

“Great. You?”

“I’m fine. Sit down.” A curly Zuk fell from Ben’s lunch. A dove was there in two seconds to retrieve it. “Getting married in a couple of weeks.”

“Ben, that’s great! I wondered how long it would be before some lucky man snatched you up.”

Ben looked away, his face turning red from the compliment.

“Who is he?”

“Robert Connor. He works in Geographic Development.”

Brook turned up one eyebrow. “Sure, I know him.”

“Of course you do,” Ben thought.

“He rewrites all my consulate documents.”

“That would be Robert. How’s Keira? And Abigail?”

“They’re both fine”, he lied. “Keira started her own firm and is doing really well.”

“That’s great, Brook. So you’re still with State.”

“Oh, yeah. They can’t get rid of me. I’ll be there when the sun don’t shine. How’s Fereday?”

“Great. Working on the Moon project.”

“So am I.”

“So when do you think they’ll have the acquisition finalized?”

Brook was not supposed to be talking about the U.S.C. mission to obtain possession of the moon, but he had no thought of distrusting Ben.

“I think we’ll have it nailed down in another year.”

“There’s a lot of opposition on this one,” Ben said, looking for any sign from Brook that the undertaking was in trouble, but he seemed confident.

“There’s always opposition whenever we annex a new country...or in this case, a satellite.” Brook watched a Classic Skiin arrive and its two occupants exit it then enter a small eatery on what used to be the middle of Crystal Drive. There was something on his mind he wanted to broach with Ben. “Ben, isn’t Fereday working on the persachip rejection issue?”

“We were, but we sold off that division as a result of the anti-trust settlement. Why? Someone you know reject the chip?”

“Yeah. Abigail. She’s one of the lucky .01 percent.”

“Don’t worry about it, Brook. The new portable chips are easy to wear.”

“Yeah, it sounds simple enough. But she’s a kid, and kids lose things. I shudder to think she might trow some place and we would not be able to locate her, or she could get into trouble and not be able to contact us. And you know how mean other kids can be; they make fun of her, as if she has some disease, instead of just being allergic to the chip implant. I was hoping we might be nearing a permanent fix for those kids who reject the implanted persachip.”

“I’m sorry, Brook, but from what I hear it’s going to be a few years before they crack that one.”

Ben sought to lighten the mood. “So what’s next on your plate... Mars?” Ben gave a little chuckle, but Brook’s face remained serious. He only looked Ben directly in the eyes and smiled, which told Ben all he needed to know about the next U.S.C. annexation project. There were a few moments of silence. Around them government workers talked of vacations to new places, such as the much-touted Atlantis City, or having dinner at the new *Shark’s* restaurant at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

Brook changed the subject. “So, how long before we see the next generation pods?” Brook thought that if Ben could try to squeeze a little information out of him, he could try to squeeze a little out of Ben. Brook leaned in a little closer to Ben. “I hear”, Brook said sotto voce, “that Fereday is working on a *portable* trow pod. Now THAT will change things.”

This time Ben smiled at Brook, and this time Brook knew all he needed to know.

Cheryl Norberg had pulled Ben off the portable trow project when she announced to Fereday executives that the devices had too many flaws to continue with testing and that they would go back to the development stage. Still, this was a top-secret project and no one outside

Fereday should have known about the devices; Ben was a little uncomfortable that Brook knew about it. He stood and said, "I have to get back to my meeting. It was good seeing you, Brook."

Brook rose and the two men shook hands as Ben continued, "Say hello to Keira for me."

"I will, Ben. So long...and best wishes for your wedding."

As Ben walked toward a tall, glass tower just a few meters from where they had sat, Brook watched, and wondered why Ben kept his cards so close.

Across the park, in front of French's Mission restaurant, four Chinese States diplomats arrived in one of the largest Skiins, which seated six. They entered the restaurant and the Skiin proceeded to its next assignment.

Brook picked up his sandwich and continued his lunch while a woman in a blue suit joined him on the bench and started on her own lunch, all the while keeping a close watch on the black, tubular device sitting on the bench next to her. Brook did not know this would be his final lunch in Crystal City...or any place else.

Ben approached the door to the building too quickly; it didn't have time to recognize him and so did not immediately open. He was a bit agitated on his way to visit his parents. He stood waiting for the door to open as he thought back to the promise he had made to his sister when they met for lunch the previous week; it had gnawed on him since.

*"Ben, you have to be open and honest with Mom and Dad. You know they will support you in whatever you do. They always have, haven't they?"*

*"Of course. But this thing with Robert is moving along pretty fast; I don't want Dad to worry I'll disappear on them."*

*"Ben, when has that ever happened? Even when you were working in the Middle East you managed regular visits. You know they appreciate all you do for them."*

*"You think?"*

*"Now, Ben! When did you start becoming needy?"*

*Ben's head popped up so fast it almost flew off his neck. "Needy? Wow."*

*"You're the most self-motivated person I've ever known. Is this what happens when you meet the love of your life?"*

*"All right, all right!"*

*"No, really. Look, I know you have a lot on your plate, but now is not the time to doubt yourself. Mom and Dad need us..." Brynn rubbed her hand down her cheek several times, a sure sign she didn't like speaking to Ben - or anyone else - in this manner. "I don't know if you realize it, but we're quickly approaching the end with Mom. I don't think it will be more than another year."*

*Ben looked Brynn directly in her eyes. His nose scrunched down and his lips pursed. "I've known that for a while. It's pretty obvious there is very little remaining that is Mom. It's so hard to see her like that."*

*"And Dad, he's still handling it well, but you can see it's getting to him, too."*

*"It's all such a bullshit situation!"*

*Brynn looked out the window of the Western Family Restaurant to check on her kids, who were running around the play area.*

*"We're all tired. I mean, Mom was diagnosed in her 40's, and she'll be 64 soon...that's gotta' take a toll on a family. But I think we've all managed well."*

*“Have we?”*

*“I think we’ve done our best to be there for Mom. You enrolled in medical school for crying out loud.”*

*“Yeah, well that didn’t work out so well.”*

*“Will you stop with the poor little me crap?”*

*Brynn was always the one in Ben’s family who told it like it was. She was normally very amicable, but could be brutally honest when the situation required it, and Ben appreciated it...sometimes he appreciated it a while after the brutal honesty, but he did always end up appreciating Brynn.*

*“Do you want dessert? They have a chocolate fountain!”*

*“Eww, yuck! Do you know how many filthy little fingers have probably been in that chocolate? Thanks, I’ll pass.”*

*“Wimp.” Brynn left the table and returned with a small dish of vanilla ice cream covered with chocolate. Ben’s mouth and nose turned up as she dug into it.*

*“If you only knew the number of bacteria lurking in that chocolate.”*

*Brynn stared at Ben, dipped her spoon into the dish, and with a flourish brought it to her mouth, then pulled the empty spoon out and arced her arm out and down to slam the spoon on the table. “Wimp”, she repeated. Ben stifled a laugh.*

*Brynn’s son, Boris, ran up to their table. “Mommy, I have to go to the bathroom.”*

*Brynn placed her hands on Boris’ shoulders, pointed him toward the bathroom, and said, “It’s right over there.”*

*“Will you go with me?”*

*“No, sir. You can go by yourself just like you do at home.”*

*Boris looked toward the door marked ‘Restroom’, hesitated, then took a deep breath and walked toward it.*

*Brynn watched until Boris entered the bathroom and closed the door behind him. She then returned her attention to Ben. “Look, there is one thing I want to ask...Dad wants to ask, really.”*

*Ben stiffened in his seat. There had been ‘family requests’ in the past, but anyone with any experience with Binary-Alzheimer’s knew what was coming. “What’s that?”*

*Brynn did her best not to allow the tears that were welling up in her eyes to spill over and down her cheeks. She paused a few moments before continuing.*

*“The doctors have been able to keep Mom physically healthy, until now. But they are warning us that that won’t continue much longer. Mom made her feelings clear many years ago. When she starts suffering physically, Dad is to make the final decision. We need to support him on this. Can you promise me that?”*

*In Ben’s mind the crowded, noisy room suddenly went completely silent and empty. He wished Robert was there with him. He wanted to yell, “No! He can’t let her go. I’m never going to let him do it!”, but after what seemed like several minutes, he simply said, “Okay.”*

*A week later, heading in a Classic Skiin across the waters below which used to be US Highway 1, Ben, who hated to break a promise, regretted that one. He couldn’t imagine how family members made the decision to allow a loved one to die. As a youth, Ben could never make those kinds of life-ending decisions. When he was 13 he lost his first pet, a spaniel named Malik, to cancer. Even as Malik lay in his dog-bed, gasping for air, Ben would not let his father take him to the veterinarian to put him down. He was certain his best friend in the world would get better; he would see to it.*

*Ben held even more determination regarding his Mom’s condition. Everyone was telling him she didn’t have much time left, but Ben had always tried to believe that, some day, his mother would recover and once again be the mother he remembered, one who loved playing word games and supported and loved Ben and his sister unconditionally. How could he let that go? Ben could foster no thought that his mother would not always be a part of his life.*

Finally the front door to Betty’s Village Alzheimer’s Facility glided open, bringing Ben back into the present. The glass atrium was decorated with a bright red Persian rug. Multiple decorated vases showcased flowers and plants; the air smelled of lilac and coconut. Seated in several of the wingback chairs were residents of the facility. Some looked up at Ben and smiled as he passed through the atrium while others sat with chins propped on their hands, looking out to the Gulf of Mexico. Ben had insisted on the facility in Key West, just 45 kilometers from his home on Big Pine Key, so that he could visit his parents quickly and often without using a trow.

As he strode past the receptionist, he gave a quick wave and said, “Hello”, but she was busy with a resident who insisted she dance with him. When Ben approached the elevator it opened and he stepped inside. As the elevator rose to the fourth floor, he could hear the anguished screams of a resident wafting through the elevator shaft. A notice on the holo-board in the elevator listed the week’s upcoming events and activities: choir rehearsal, a shopping trip, a picnic on Smather’s

Boardwalk. Surrounding the list were photos of residents on outings, some standing, others in hoverchairs, but all with distant expressions, staff standing alongside or behind them, attempting to make them smile or wave. As the elevator rose, the screaming faded. Stepping into the hallway Ben felt as if the world had suddenly gone silent. He was aware of his own breathing as he walked to his mother's room. A cleaning mechanical glided past.

He knocked on his mother's door, which opened for him automatically. The room was bright, with much light pouring in from the windows. There were flowers on the coffee table, but their sweet aroma was masked by the acrid smell of ammonia and chlorine. As bright and cheery as the room was, Ben always felt it was the saddest place he had ever known. As he entered the room it announced his presence: "Benjamin Barnett". The holopaper displayed lots of photos of Ben's family in a vain attempt to trigger memories in Sherry Barnett: Brynn and Ben as children on virtual vacations with their parents, Sherry at work on a piece of clay in her artist's studio, Ben's father, Zachary, sneaking up behind his wife to scare her. A huge picture window looked out on Sunset Key toward the Dry Tortugas, or the 20 square meters of it that was still above water. Locals nicknamed Fort Jefferson, now under water, 'Fort Sinkorswim'. Sherry's favorite orchestral music played softly in the background. None of these stimuli had any effect on Ben's mother; she sat on the far end of a sky-blue sofa, her hands folded in her lap, staring out the window.

Ben always felt defeated when he visited his mother; his shoulders slouched and his head drooped. He sat at the opposite end of the sofa and looked for any encouraging sign from her.

"Hi Mom", he said, barely above a whisper. Sherry did not respond, or even move. Ben stretched around to try to get in the line of Sherry's vision. "Mom?" She continued to look out over Key West, focused on exactly what, Ben could not discern. Perhaps it was the children playing on the boardwalk that traversed the floating town.

"Ben?" Ben jumped when he unexpectedly heard his name. After a moment he realized the sound came from the other end of the room and looked around to see his father coming toward him. "I thought we wouldn't see you for a while."

Ben felt he heard an accusation in his father's voice. "Why would you think that?"

"Weeeell, it's just you've been awfully busy lately."

Ben rose from the sofa and gave his father a hug. His father gave him a gentle slap on the back. Ben said, "You know I'm never too busy to see you and Mom." He felt guilty for trying to spin things to make himself feel better about not being around for his parents the past few months.

"Robert with you?"

"Not this time."

Ben was a younger version of his father. Zachary Barnett was actually a bit taller than his son and still thin, with a sharp nose and bright eyes situated symmetrically on his handsome face. At 68 years old he was in good health for someone who had been challenged with taking care of a sick family member for 22 years.

Zachary looked to his wife and asked Ben, "Has she said anything?"

Ben followed his father's look to his mother and shook his head. "She didn't move a muscle when I came in."

Zachary's face fell. His eyes lost a bit of their glow. "It's been that way, lately. I used to be able to coax a few words out of her, but lately..." He took Sherry's hand.

Ben's stomach churned. He took a deep breath and exhaled it quickly. "What is Dr. Mountz saying?"

Zachary looked at Ben and said, "He thinks we're in the final year."

Ben felt as if he might vomit.

Zachary continued, "Have you spoken with your sister?"

"Last week." Tears welled up in Ben's eyes as he reassured his father. "I promised her I would support you on whatever you decide about Mom."

Zachary put his free hand on Ben's shoulder. "Whatever we decide, it has to be as a family."

Ben looked out the window, still trying to determine what Sherry was looking at. "Dad, I promised Brynn I would support your decision, but please don't ask me to be part of *making* that decision, because I won't do it."

There was a long silence, finally broken when Sherry turned to her husband and son, and smiled. Her white hair was pinned into a neat bun on the back of her head. Once considered by most people a pretty woman, the Binary-Alzheimer's had taken its toll; her skin drooped from her face and she had large, dark bags under her eyes, almost as if she, herself, felt the stress of losing her mind. She turned her head toward Ben. He said, "Hi, Mom." She turned back to the window and seemed to follow a flock of gulls flying up from the boardwalk and out to sea.



“So!”, Zachary broke in. “How are things at work? When are we all going to the Moon colony?”

“That is actually moving along quite well. But I’ve been sidelined with other things.”

“Another new project?”

“Not really.” Ben paused a moment before asking his father’s advice. “Dad, when you were in Treasury, did you ever have any dealings with John Abaddon?”

“The great, would-be Prime Minister of Great Britain?”

“Why do you say ‘would-be’?”

“I never met him – he came on the scene pretty much after I retired. But I heard from many people that that man was a pain in the neck to everyone he ever met. Why? Have you had a run-in with him?”

“Something like that. Secretary Verdugo has asked me to come back to the State Department and head up an investigation into Abaddon. Seems they’ve heard some very disturbing things about him.”

“I have no doubt. Now that the quarantine is lifted and he has the ability to run rampant, I imagine he is quite the handful. You gonna’ do it?”

“I don’t think so. I have my hands full with Fereday right now. I’ve got Moon City to work on, plus I was just handed a couple other projects, including Atlantis City, which, alone, is big enough to keep me busy for the next year. Then there’s the new Trow pods coming down the pike next year, and that’s going to mean pod upgrades all over the world, not to mention the new headquarters...”

Zachary cut Ben off. “Yes! Sounds like you are very busy, indeed.” Zachary rose from the sofa and walked to the kitchen. “You want a drink?”

“Dad, it’s 2:30 in the afternoon!”

“That late, eh?” Zachary’s mouth widened into a sly grin. He made two martinis and brought them to the sofa, handing one to Ben. “Olive, no onion.”

Ben reluctantly took the drink, sipped it, then sighed as he relaxed into his seat on the sofa.

“Ben”, his father said, “I’ve never told you what to do, but I’ve also never felt you were backing away from a challenge.”

“You think I’m scared?”

“Are you?”

Ben looked at the photos on the holopaper on the wall as it scrolled through the family's history. "I just feel that I've done my part for the country...I want a little time to figure out what I want to do next."

Ben caught a glimpse of a photo of him shaking hands with President Montgomery, accepting his 'Distinguished Service' award for his work securing Sobhi as the first of several countries added to the U.S.C. during Ben's tenure at the State Department.

"Ben, I know you've had enough, but a direct request from the Secretary of State?"

"You think I should do it?"

"I think that if that is something *you* decide you want, you should do it. But if there's something else calling you..."

"What do you mean?"

"Ben, I believe we all have something that speaks to us. I've watched you try to find your place in the world."

"And where *is* that?"

Ben's father looked at Ben; he was reminded of the time when Ben told him he was dropping out of Medical School. Ben had the same, lost look he had that day. It was a look he thought Ben held until he joined Special Forces. Zachary thought Ben was his happiest, then.

"That's not for me to tell you." Zachary looked to his wife, who stared back at him, her gentle eyes wide, searching for their own answers. "Your mother and I tried to let you find your own way, to be who you wanted to be. I could tell you when I thought you seemed at your best, but I am not standing in your shoes." Zachary thought of a favorite photo of his son, in his Special Forces fatigues, on a mission, and smiling from ear to ear. "You have to discover what lies at the end of your journey."

"It feels selfish to worry about my own little problems when you and Mom..."

"Now just hold it right there! Your mother and I are fine...have been fine. We'll continue to be fine. If that's all that's stopping you..."

"Not only that...I don't want this thing with Robert...it's moving faster than I thought it would." Ben looked to his mother, then to his father. "I think we're going to be married."

"Ben! That's great! When?"

"I don't know. But Dad, I want you to know that I'll always be here for you and Mom."

"I know that! Why do you say that?"

“I don’t know. I guess I’ve been feeling a little neglectful lately...since I met Robert I’ve been spending all my free time with him.”

Zachary saw the image of Ben’s soccer trophies that were projected on the holopaper behind Ben’s head. “I appreciate the sentiment, Ben, but you should live your life and not worry so much about your Mom and me. We’re just fine.”

“You know, Dad, you keep saying ‘We’re fine’, and I just realized that’s what I say whenever I don’t want people to know the truth about how I’m feeling. I say, ‘I’m just fine’, when actually I’m not ‘just fine’.”

For the first time Ben felt like an adult with his parents and not like the little boy in the room. Zachary looked up at Ben and gave him a little grin.

“Think you know me pretty well, don’t ya’?”

“The nut doesn’t fall very far from the tree.”

“Then you know how I feel about you putting your life on hold for us. The best thing you can do for us is to live your life – in full. When we need you, we’ll let you know.”

“Have you always known exactly what you wanted?”

“We all have a crisis of faith, once in a while.”

“But I seem to be crashing from one thing to another. Why can’t I settle on one thing?”

“Who says you have to settle? You’ve been successful at almost everything you’ve worked at. Perhaps you’re destined to be a jack-of-all-trades. Nothing wrong with that.” Zachary finished his drink and took their glasses to the kitchen. “Now, go talk all this over with Robert, and see how he feels about that gauntlet the Secretary threw down at your feet...you’ll figure it out.”

Zachary returned to the sofa and sat down next to Sherry. He put his arm around her shoulder. “And trust me when I say, ‘We’ll be fine’.”

The door to the apartment opened and a mechanical entered and asked, “May I tidy up the room, sir?”

Zachary waved the digital in. “Sure, have at it.”

“Thank you, sir.” The mechanical cleaner moved to the bedroom and began changing the sheets.

Barnett motioned for Ben to leave. “Now get out of here and next time bring Robert with you.”

“I will.” Ben rose from the sofa and walked to the door, turned, and watched his parents sitting on the sofa as Zachary pointed out some Key West landmarks beyond the window. “There’s the old Cuba Advisory building, and that over there is the Sunken Treasury Museum, right next to our favorite restaurant, Botanas, remember?”

Ben didn’t wait for the door to automatically close behind him as he left; he pulled it sharply closed with a thud. He passed several rooms with open doors on his way to the elevator. He wondered if their families asked themselves if it would just be easier if their loved ones passed. He was horrified that the thought had entered his mind; he felt enormous guilt. He entered the elevator and confirmed, “Lobby”. Once again the anguished screams of a resident drifted through the elevator as it descended. Ben was not aware he had stopped breathing. When the door opened in the lobby, he walked as quickly as he could to the exit, bypassing the begging looks on residents’ faces. The exit door opened and Ben fairly ran outside the building. He took in a deep breath and let it out, beginning to breath normally once again; he stood a while, staring out to the Gulf of Mexico, wondering if he was destined to feel forever in flux.

John Abaddon threw open the door. It slapped the wall as he strode briskly to the gathering standing around a circular, glass-top table that was normally used to play holographic games. His feet slapped the floor as he walked.

He first approached Pamela Herr, Ministry of Defence, and shook her hand. “Minister.”

“Hello, John”, she replied. “Are we ready for phase II?” She had already been extremely helpful implementing Colony Dominion’s plans. Herr was one of the few in the organization Abaddon trusted. He replied simply by patting her hand.

As usual Abaddon wore a thoroughly British suit consisting of black slacks, vest, and jacket. His white handkerchief peeked out of his jacket pocket and offset a black-and-white striped tie. Black patent leather shoes, a pocket watch, and black umbrella completed the image he wanted to portray – that of a typical, well-respected, respectful, not altogether extinct Englishman.

Abaddon had known all the people in the room for a number of years; he felt he knew exactly where he stood with them and exactly how much he could ask of each. Still, he always kept his guard up and said as little as was absolutely necessary. He looked around the room and noted the attendance, or lack thereof, of each Colony Dominion member. From this point in his planning, only those members attending this meeting could be trusted in the future.

Robert Montecurisco, Her Majesty’s Treasury, sat two seats away and was pivotal to their plans, diverting funds to the organization. Agatha Breathwaite, Ministry of Justice, saw to it that no member caught or accused of high treason would suffer the consequences.

Other members of Colony Dominion were employed within various offices of the government. Percy Fallows was an assistant to a House of Commons member, Agnetha Hart was a contracts administrator, Aldrich Taylor supervised the Parliament’s Locale. Three stragglers, Kenneth Leith, Powell Rubens, and Barton Smythe, Rubens and Smythe being Parliament members, took their seats. Abaddon had seen to it that all members were highly, personally motivated, and were determined to see the British Empire restored to its former glory. Everyone in the room had lost family members due to the virus and quarantine.

Abaddon peered at Barton Smythe sitting at the end of the table. He distrusted him now more than ever. Several of Colony Dominion’s prospects had been warned by someone to “watch their backs”, foiling plans that took months to put into place. Abaddon had always been suspicious

of Smythe's loyalty; now he held evidence it was Smythe who had issued those warnings. Smythe would have to go.

In order to keep their organization and their plans a secret, Colony Dominion met in a different location each meeting. This one took place in the back room of Shay's Pub in Brent Cross, a sleepy little suburb north of London.

Kenneth Leith, a Colony Dominion operative equally as dedicated as Abaddon to the restoration of the British Empire, circulated the paneled room, monitoring the organization's Locale to be certain every member had set their persachip to 'special private'. Colony Dominion meeting records were closely guarded; the organization's Locale was accessible to only three people: Abaddon, Leith, and Phillip Carico, who had disappeared a week earlier.

Abaddon began the meeting. "Today we take the next step on the road to our Empire's salvation..."

*John Winston Churchill Abaddon turned 17 years old the same day the quarantine was imposed upon the once great British Empire. It was also the same day, March 15, 2073, that he became the British Isles Upper School Level debate champion. The debate, virus, and subsequent quarantine would stamp him with unrelenting memories and shape his entire life.*

*Abaddon became interested in wrestling at an early age and by 16 was a formidable wrestler, winning more than half his matches. But his academic career had been less than outstanding. He regularly took home Bs and Cs, to the chagrin of his mother, a former teacher. His father, a failed businessman, paid little attention to John's academics. John was not interested in lofty philosophies or the greater good; his world was one of challenge and defiance. Throughout his young life John had challenged the status quo and sought to bring people to his way of thinking. He was a highly intelligent, if lazy, student and far ahead of other students, but his bent toward defiance was met with push-back and he was forced into a peg-hole he did not like. He did not know how to achieve his goals, and he became known as an ineffectual blowhard; other students his age did not understand him.*

*In year 11 the English teacher, Mr. Franks, asked John to be on the debate team. It was not because John was an accomplished speaker, but because he was constantly talking in class, interrupting Mr. Franks with a challenge to his teaching, and because Mr. Franks observed John in the hallways forever failing in his attempts to win an argument. When his words did not win the day John turned to his fists. He had a reputation as a formidable fighter.*

*John's first foray into debate was a simple public forum debate on the subject of allowing 11<sup>th</sup> year students to skip final exams if they landed in the top 10% percentile of their class. John was to argue **for** the argument; John's team lost the debate to a team of mostly 12<sup>th</sup> year students.*

*John did not like it when he lost, and he nearly always lost. In all styles of debate - policy, Lincoln-Douglas, and public forum debate - John tended to fall back on the idea that if he made what he believed were solid points on the subject, laying out the facts, then he should win. But his team seldom won and he was disappointed in his team, and himself.*

*Mr. Franks saw John struggling and counseled him.*

*"John, you are a passionate person; I want to see you put that passion into your debating."*

*"I try, but no one sees my side of things." John was frustrated whenever he acknowledged his shortcomings as it made him feel like a loser. But he trusted Mr. Franks.*

*"Try this: Don't focus on your own position; focus on your target, then annihilate it...just as in your wrestling. You must render the other side's position untenable. Use your evidence. Destroy their position so they have nothing to argue. Go for the gut; punch through the gut. Don't pull your punch until your opponent is in the next block. And always act like you are winning." John listened to Mr. Franks and could identify with the physical analogy, but still he struggled.*

*A few weeks later John and his team debated London's Thatcher School, a well-respected institution where nearly 100% of the students were accepted into university, often with scholarships. John knew the debate against Thatcher would be tough. The day before the debate, John got into another fistfight; it would prove to be a revelation to him.*

*John lived six houses from another boy who attended the same school. Erik had never liked John, nor did John like Erik. John passed Erik's house at least twice a week, on his way to and from school. If Erik's dog was outside it would run to John and nip at his ankles. It was more an annoyance than an attack; the dog never broke skin, nor was there ever any blood. But on this day John was fed up – with many things - and so when the dog came running at him, John kicked the dog aside, who then went yelping back to his sanctuary in the house. Erik witnessed the kick and ran outside to confront John.*

*"Eh, you fuckin' kicked my dog?"*

*"He attacked me. He's always attacking me."*

*"You think that was an attack?" Erik cocked his fist back and threw it forward, smashing Abaddon on the side of his nose. John was momentarily stunned, then regained his footing and*

*shot back with his own blow to Erik, which landed on his chin. Erik lunged again and the two were brawling with all they had.*

*Erik was bigger than John and was getting the better of him. With each blow John did his best to shake it off and punch back, but John was losing, and he knew it. He punched the air more than he punched Erik. His mind was a blur of swirling images of the two of them in battle. Then Erik landed what should have been a knock-out punch. John staggered back. As he struggled to stay on his feet, John's mind suddenly became clear. He shook his head and looked at Erik. He heard Mr. Frank's voice whisper to him: "Gut him. Go for the gut; punch through the gut. Don't pull your punch until he is in the next block."*

*John punched Erik in his stomach, reaching past his stomach to punch his fist through Erik's gut. It sent the surprised enemy staggering backwards and then falling to the ground, gasping for air. Erik dared not get up, or even move. Abaddon stood above Erik, a feeling of calm washing over him. He felt powerful. He felt invincible. He felt that he would never again lose a fight. He couldn't wait to find out.*

*Abaddon applied the same gutting technique to his debates. During a debate against Sussex on the subject of eliminating the final year of high school, he amassed a mountain of data for his position, which gutted the other team's position and made them ineffectual in their rebuttal. On the subject of the United Kingdom joining with other countries to form one, global government he successfully demonstrated that a single, worldwide government would result in the United Kingdom losing its identity, traditions, and sovereignty. John Abaddon had already become a staunch nationalist.*

*Abaddon had learned how to win, how to take out his target, both intellectually and physically. He graduated high school with a dozen debate trophies on his bedroom shelf, which went with him to his university dorm room. Draped over one trophy was a blood-dried handkerchief, a reminder of what it felt like to be punched in the nose.*

*In his final year at university John met Adele; they were married a year later. Adele also saw life in black and white, and John was attracted to her fierce determination. It was Adele who was determined to have a family despite the hardships the virus and the quarantine had wrought. Two years after their marriage their first son, John Thatcher, was born. Two more sons, Winston and Thad, followed within another two years.*



*Out of university John first worked as a business consultant for an accounting firm. He was in Edinburgh advising a clothing manufacturer when a call came through the Presence. John saw that it was Adele calling him, and knowing she would understand if he didn't take the call immediately, said, "Not now" to his wrist-worn Personal Administration Device, or PAD. The call ended.*

*A few seconds later Adele, who had override permission on John's PAD, appeared in front of him. She was hysterical.*

*"He's got it!", she screamed. Her eyes were wide and red and she tore at her hair, her head jolting left and right. 'He has it, John, he has it!'"*

*John's heart beat so hard he felt it would burst out of his chest. "Who?", was all he could say.*

*"Winston!" Now that she was speaking with her husband, Adele let her guard down and was crying.*

*"Wha... What? How? How did he get it?"*

*"I don't know!"*

*"Are you sure? Has he seen a doctor?"*

*"We're at the hospital, John. We're at the HOSPITAL! He's in isolation and they won't let me go to him."*

*John was not certain how he asked the next question, but he had to know.*

*"How long?"*

*"Two weeks!"*

*John was at the hospital two hours later. He and Adele spent the next two weeks watching young Winston writhe constantly in pain as first his liver, then his kidneys, heart, and lungs slowly disintegrated. The cries of Winston's agony were interminable. He wailed and screamed as if a knife were being plunged into his body every few seconds; worse, his parents could not hold him or comfort him. Doctors could not safely administer enough Morphine to relieve the pain.*

*John and Adele were standing on the outside of the glass-walled isolation area when Winston took one final gasp of air. His twisted body released all its pain and relaxed into the bed; he looked as though he were, finally, in a peaceful sleep.*

*Three months later, Adele also died of the virus.*

*Young Winston and Adele's deaths transformed Abaddon's world...and his belief system. He became sullen and angry. He wanted those responsible for the death of his wife and son to pay. And the only way he knew to do that was to become a force to be reckoned with. He vowed to gut his enemy.*

*A year after Winston and Adele's deaths John ran for Mayor of Lightwater, a small village about an hour southwest of London. His candidacy was marked by strong language and vitriolic condemnation of his opponent, who had held the office for 20 years. John won the election, and got noticed by powerful people in London who soon approached him to run for Parliament. His ascent to Parliament was quick, but not easy. John made a lot of enemies by tearing apart his Parliamentary opponent, Sharon Biltmore, a much-loved former head of an organization working with virus victims and families. In speeches, John shifted the blame for the British Empire's demise onto anyone and everyone remotely connected with the virus.*

*In one particularly effective speech before a crowd of 8,000, Abaddon railed, "Mrs. Biltmore, it should be noted, blithely sat back and allowed our country to be stolen, our Empire to be disassembled, and our citizens to descend into an ongoing hell. When the Global United Front and the U.S.C. demanded our country's citizens be quarantined, Mrs. Biltmore did nothing but offer platitudes. Her so-called Community Health Services is not only ineffectual, but it was her lackadaisical and feeble leadership that have led to millions of needless deaths that continue on a daily basis.*

*"So here we are, cut off from the EuroZ, indeed cut off from the entire world, and made to suffer the deaths of millions of our Mothers, our Fathers, our Aunts, Uncles, cousins, friends, and our children! And at the same time, Mrs. Biltmore took home a nice, fat income-share while our families were murdered and our Empire destroyed.*

*"I have a very personal experience with the virus, as many of you do. I know what it is to cradle your dying child in your arms. I know what it is to look into your wife's eyes, begging you to end her suffering. I know what it is like to have a hole in your heart that nothing will ever fill.*

*"I cannot bring back my son, my wife, but I can work to ensure that your son, your daughter, your granddaughter, never suffers the same, horrible fate. I will not rest until this virus is eradicated, and our people, our country, are made whole again. I assure you that our great Empire will rise again and that no one, not this virus, not the Global United Front, and not the United States and Countries, will stand in our way. We will once again be a force in the world. A*

*force of change. A force of good. A force of power! I will never give in. I will never stop fighting. We are the new British Empire and together we will be great again!”*

*Thirty-year-old John Abaddon was caught up in his own rhetoric. Looking around the hall he saw images of Adele and Winston, applauding along with the crowd.*

*Abaddon’s eight years as Parliamentarian to Surrey Heath led to a run for Prime Minister, the position he felt he needed to carry out his plan of restoring the Empire. It was a huge undertaking. He looked to his supporters in the Realist Party to quell fears that, this time, he would not be able to gut his opponent to win the election, for as confident and vitriolic as Abaddon was outwardly, inwardly he was still that young teenager, fighting his first fight against his old neighbor Erik. There was no doubt this was the toughest fight of his life.*

*“...so now I seek to be your Prime Minister, and with your help and support we will restore our Empire, restore our people, and restore our faith in Providence. God save the New British Empire, and God Save the Queen.”*

Two days later, Paul Galbraith was elected Prime Minister. The loss only galvanized Abaddon.

Ayn brought Ben his drink. “Here you are. Didn’t know anyone else besides me still drank Campari.”

Ben took a sip, then said, “It’s my way of fooling myself into believing I’m drinking less.” He then looked at Ayn and realized how that sounded. “Not that I drink that much – or often.” Ben gritted his teeth and looked around the room. “I mean, there are probably a dozen or so bottles of wine at home.” It was then Ben decided to stop talking. He had never felt so much pressure to impress anyone like he wanted to impress Robert’s family.

Ayn smiled and said, “You’re cute.”

Robert and Ben had only arrived at Robert’s sister’s house a few minutes earlier, but already, despite his runaway mouth, Ben felt at home. Like Robert, Ayn was confident and knew who she was. And like all people who know themselves, Ayn felt no need to prove herself to anyone other than herself. She was open and interested in people.

Ayn sat on the sofa next to Ben. She turned to Robert and motioned for him to sit in the armchair next to the sofa. “Robbie, sit down. You’re nervous as a cat.”

Ben’s head snapped up. His eyes grew huge and his mouth was agape. He silently mouthed to Robert, “Robbie?!”

Robert rolled his eyes. “Don’t get any ideas...Ayn’s the only person who gets to call me that.”

Ben chuckled and said, “We’ll see.”

Ayn said, “Mom and Dad always called him that; he always has been, and always will be ‘Robbie’. Ayn’s freckled face scrunched up when she was listening to others. Her curly, blonde hair was polar opposite to Robert’s.

“This is great,” Ben said, fiendishly rubbing his palms together. “What else should I know about ‘Robbie’?”

Robert cocked his head and gave Ben a ‘warning’ look. Ben shrunk back a little and decided not to push the joke any further.

“Not much to tell, actually”, Ayn said and took a drink from her Campari and orange juice. “Robbie never gave me any trouble. He was fourteen when he moved in here, and was off to college three years later.” Ayn reached for Robert’s hand and squeezed it. “Who you see right here is exactly who Robert has always been.”

“Yes”, Robert broke in. “I emerged from the womb, fully formed and decked out in a blue suit and glasses, ready to dot the “i’s” and cross the “T’s”, as everyone is so fond of saying about me.”

Ben noted how readily Robert made fun of himself. Despite his nervousness over his sister meeting Ben, he seemed to feel really comfortable in Ayn’s house. He hoped Robert would feel that way in their own home.

Ben swirled his glass, spinning the ice to chill the drink. “So you’ve *always* been a stickler for the details?”

“When he was 12 years old, Mom told me she caught him alphabetizing the spices in her kitchen.” Ayn looked to Robert to see if he was okay with her telling this story. Sensing no opposition from Robert, she continued. “When he got to Barley, he argued with Mom for 10 minutes explaining to her that it was a cereal grain and that it should be stored next to the flour.”

Robert tried to explain his reasoning. “I’ll admit I was a little miffed. Mom said she used it for cooking soups and stews, and so kept it with the spices and herbs, but it is *still* a cereal grain!”

“Well, he hasn’t changed much”, Ben said, finishing his drink.

“Does he still hang all his clothes in the closet according to the color chart?”

“First the shirts by color, sleeve length, and type, then pants, then suits. And he insists that I organize my closet the same way.”

Ayn jumped in. “And all the hanger hooks must face the back of the closet, right?”

Ben almost spit out his drink.

Robert attempted to change the subject. “Alright, this is all very boring, especially to me.”

Ben looked around the room. On one wall were two holographic reproductions of works by Monet that changed every five minutes or so. On another wall were other reproductions, family photos, and a holographic light that illuminated the room to the user’s desire.

Ben looked to an area where the holo-wall scrolled through works by Farandy, a famous 21st Century digital artist. In another square were works by Ayn’s children. Family photos filled the wall over the fireplace, changing every few seconds. One in particular caught Ben’s eye as the photos cycled through. “Who was that?”, Ben said, referring to a photo of Robert and a sandy-haired young man falling from a Skiin.

Ayn looked to Robert, who gave Ayn a slight nod of reassurance. She turned to Ben. “That was Chad.”

Ben knew Robert had been married before, and that his husband had died, but Robert had not spoken to Ben about Chad.

Ayn continued, “Chad was a great guy, and I loved him very much.” Robert gave Ayn’s hand a squeeze as she rose to approach the photos display. She swiped her hand over the photos a couple of times until the photo of Robert and Chad appeared again.

The three of them sat in silence a moment. Ben studied the photo; Robert looked at Ben. “How did he die?” Ben felt this was the right moment to ask that question.

Ayn answered for Robert. “A brain tumor.”

Robert continued. “It grew very fast and went undetected until it was too late. He was gone in five months.”

Ayn’s two children, Marie and Tym, came running into the living room. Marie was seven and Tym was nine. They both ran straight to Robert, who knelt on the floor and gave them both big hugs.

“Oh my gosh, look how big you are!”

Marie had a very pressing question for Robert. “Mom said we had to ask you if we can go to your wedding...can we, Uncle Robbie?”

“I wouldn’t even go myself if you weren’t there.”

Marie burst into a huge grin. Tym looked to his mother and gave her an ‘I-told-you-so’ look.

Following Marie and Tym into the room was Ayn’s husband, Manuel. Robert stood and he and Manuel hugged. “How have you been, Manuel?”

“I’ve been great. But we don’t see you enough.”

“Manuel, this is Ben.”

Manuel stood about 5’10” and was fairly thin. His black curly hair made him seem a bit taller. Ben stood and Manuel gave him a hug. “Really nice to finally meet you, Ben. You two are all we’ve been talking about, lately.”

Ben looked to Ayn and Robert as he said, “Well, as Robert just said, that sounds completely boring.”

Manuel waved the children to come to him. “Marie, Tym, did you say hello to Ben?”

Tym approached Ben and said, “Hello Ben”. He held out his hand to Ben to shake.

Ben shook his hand and answered, “Hi Tym. I’ve heard so much about you...both of you.”

Marie just held Manuel's hand and giggled.

Manuel then sat on the sofa next to Ayn. "So Ayn tells me you both work on the Moon City project. Is that how you met?"

"No, that's just a coincidence. We met when I mistakenly trowed to the Mount Everest Café." Ben looked at Robert and smiled. "There were no tables available and Robert invited me to sit at his."

Robert chuckled. "What could I do? He was wandering around the restaurant like a little lost puppy, begging for a place to eat."

"Oh, I've been wanting to go there." Ayn's eyes lit up when the café was mentioned. "Is it really as spectacular as it appears?"

"I don't know", said Ben, grinning at Robert, "we'll all have to go sometime and take a look when we're not otherwise distracted."

"It is spectacular", continued Robert. "The mountain peak is right there in front of you. Quite the view. But I felt a bit guilty, what with us being inside that nice warm restaurant and those poor climbers practically freezing to death just a few meters away."

Ayn was fascinated. "You know, I'm all for us getting out of our homes, away from virtual reality and getting out into the real world, but these 'Naturalists' seem to be taking it a little too far, if you ask me."

Manuel said, "How is that different from you slodering a book, page by page?" Manuel loved all the conveniences of modern-day life. Like most people, he didn't read books the old-fashioned way; books could now be 'expressed' to the reader's brain in an instant.

He looked to Robert and Ben. "Expressing books is the only way to go." Manuel pointed to his head as he said, "Download it and in it goes."

"I feel I am more emotionally attached to a book when I take the time to read it." Ayn was feeling a bit defensive. "Where's the fun in an instant download? Besides, if an author takes the time to write a novel, the least I can do is take the time to actually read it."

Robert had returned to his seat on the sofa. Always a stickler for facts, he said, "Actually, almost half the books published these days are written by the Presence."

Manuel said, "I can't tell the difference between Hemingway and a Halfla Digital."

"Apparently", said Ben, "neither can the Pulitzer committee."

Ayn continued, "I know! What's the point of awarding a Pulitzer prize to a computer? Who's going to be inspired by that? Anyway, *I* can tell the difference. These days I only read books recommended by 'The Sloder Reader'. Only books by real people can get on their Locale."

Robert said, "If I had to sloder all the documents that came through my persachip, I'd never get anything done, I'd be reading all day. The only way to get through it all is to download it and express it."

Manuel jumped in. "I like expressing; I haven't slodered a book in years."

"To each his own", Ayn said, then slapped Manuel's knee as she rose. "Come on, let's eat." As the adults stood and started for the dining room Marie and Tym were already halfway there. "Robert, you do still like Olives Ascolana, don't you?"

Robert's eyes lit up. "You didn't make them, did you?"

"Of course I did."

"They're so difficult!"

Ayn smiled and said, "This is a special occasion! And I have a little help in the form of Rosie."

Robert said, "You'll have to tell Rosie to download the recipe to Ben's persachip."

Robert stopped and waited for Ben to stand as he asked Robert, "Am I going to have to learn to make Olives Ascolana?" Robert didn't respond. Ben just nodded his head, thinking, "of course."

Ben placed his hand on the small of Robert's back as they headed for the dining room. A small house-cleaning mechanical then entered and began tidying the living room while the family ate.

As Ben spooned the last bit of Tiramisu from his dessert bowl, a call came through. Ben excused himself and walked to the living room.

"Noah! Hi. How are you?"

Usually a hologram of the caller would appear before Ben, but he only heard Noah's voice. "So you're in Chicago?"

"Yeah, visiting a friend's family. What's up?"

"Well, since you're close and I still can't trow, I thought we could get together." Noah paused a moment. When Ben did not respond he said, "I would like to see you."



Ben was not certain about Noah's intentions. He had deliberately stayed away from Noah, as he was asked to do. He fingered a flower in a vase on the coffee table. Looking toward the dining room he said, "I guess it would be alright."

"Great. I'll meet you at *Howard's Gatherings* in half an hour."

"Oh, Noah, that's pretty quick."

"Just tell Robert you're going to meet your old boyfriend. I'm sure he won't mind."

The call abruptly ended. Ben's eyes went wide and he cocked his head. He said aloud, "How does he know about Robert?" He also wondered how Noah knew he was in Chicago. He was too curious not to meet with Noah. He walked back to the dining room and sat down again in his chair. He leaned into Robert and said, "Noah wants to meet with me in a half hour."

"Noah? I thought you were supposed to stay away from him for a while."

"Maybe he's better. Do you mind? You can go with."

"No, I'm not going...I trust you. Besides, if there is anything there, at least we'll find out now."

Ben felt a bit deflated. "You know there's nothing there. There never was, really."

"I know," said Robert. He kissed Ben. "Go." Robert rose from his seat and said, "Tym, Marie, how about a game of Peg-O-My-Heart?"

Ben went out the front door and hailed a TaxiSkiiin. "Howard's Gatherings, Forest Park."

Ben walked through the air-door opening to *Howard's Gatherings*; his nose lit up with the aroma of fresh brewed coffee. He looked around to the various tables, booths, and sofas and chairs, but did not see Noah. He decided to get a coffee.

Ben waited his turn behind a young woman who rode her Skiin up to the counter. The digital pulled up her identity from the Presence database and attempted to greet her. "Good morning, Ms. Harrison. May I make you a Skinny Mini with two dollops..."

"Yeah, shut up. Give me a double shot espresso with milk on the side, and a chocolate mint decaf."

The digital asked, "Would you like those to be medium or large?"

"Whaaat??" The young woman leaned into the counter and got close to the digital's face. "You mean you don't know what size I want??? You're pretty stupid, yeah?"

"Large?", guessed the digital.

"No! Medium." She smiled to herself. No matter what the digital answered, the woman would have ordered the opposite. Turning around, and in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone in the store, the woman said, "So much for the almighty, all-knowing Presence." She turned back to the digital, who handed her two cups in a carrying tray. She grabbed the tray and joined another woman in a private booth at the rear of the coffeeshop.

There arose an etiquette speaking to robots, digitals, and mechanicals. Most people were not threatened by them and remained respectful. There were laws to protect artificial intelligence devices, but some humans, no matter how a digital tried to help, attempted to demonstrate their self-perceived superiority. These are the people who felt the need to insult a robot in order to feel better about themselves. Although it was a completely ineffectual and ultimately unsatisfying endeavor, some people physically abused digital humans, and more often, mechanicals, which was a property crime that could result in six months home detention.

Before Ben even stepped up to the counter, the coffeeshop's Presence had already recognized him and, based on over one-hundred thousand bits of information gleaned from the Presence, displayed a Café Latte before him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Barnett. May I make you a Café Latte, medium, extra strong?"

"Good afternoon. Yes, please."

Ben sat with his coffee in a booth and swiped across the ads that immediately began floating in front of him. When he reached the Presence News, he ‘touched’ it to begin a summary of news items. There was a story on a Fereday employee that had been reported missing six months earlier. Ben brought up that news item. A vid began playing showing drawings of Atlantis City, a view of space from one of the Fereday way stations, and a distraught woman, as a narrator reported the facts.

*“The body of a man working on the new City of Atlantis has been discovered floating in space, 65 kilometers above the Earth. William A. Renders, an employee of Fereday Space, who was project manager for the new underwater city, disappeared six months ago while trowing to his home in Berlin, New Jersey. His wife said he never arrived home and officials have been looking for him ever since. A Fereday employee discovered the body while testing a new way-station above the Earth, 85 kilometers above Florida. Fereday is investigating to determine how this happened and if a problem with their trow pods is indicated.”*

Ben called his boss, Cheryl Norberg. Her image appeared before him.

“Hi, Cheryl. I just heard about Bill Renders being found. Do we know what happened?”

“We’re looking into it. An internal company notification was about to go out to employees, but as usual the Presence put it out there first.”

“What are we doing about it?”

“Obviously, if our trow pods had anything to do with this, we want to know. But so far we haven’t found any irregularities. The pods seem to be working optimally.”

“Who do you have working on this?”

“Pierre Balanchine. He’s at Atlantis City right now tearing apart the old pod Renders used.”

“Balanchine? Is that all we have? He’s great with the technology, but I’m not certain he’s who we want heading up an investigation.”

“Well, you’ll remember you turned me down.”

Ben knew this was coming. He scrunched up his face and rubbed the back of his neck. “I really thought he would turn up in a few days.” Ben wanted to change the subject. “When’s the funeral?”

“Thursday.”

Ben could tell Norberg was unhappy with him. “Do you think there is anything I can do?”

“Not now. I’ll see you Thursday.” Norberg’s image faded and a WorldMart ad began playing. Ben swiped the ad away.

Ben cupped his coffee in his hands and stared into the distance. At a table at the front of the store a woman cradled her crying baby. The Digital Human behind the counter asked the woman, “Can I prepare a bottle for Joey?” The woman shook her head ‘yes’ and mouthed, “Thank you”.

Ben was suddenly aware of Noah standing beside the booth; he hadn’t noticed him approach. He looked at Noah then jumped up.

“Noah!” Ben hugged him, and Noah hugged him back. “So good to see you!” Ben looked at him a moment. He thought he was too thin. “Here, sit down.”

Noah sat opposite Ben. Ben swiped across the ad images and called up the menu. “What would you like?”

The Presence did not seem to know anything about the curly-headed young man sitting with Ben and offered no drink suggestions.

“I’ll have a decaf, black.” Noah forced a smile.

“Right away, sir,” answered the DH, who appeared in place of the menu. “Beg your pardon, sir, but we don’t seem to have your payment data available.”

“That’s alright,” Ben spoke up. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Very good, Mr. Barnett.”

Noah’s coffee arrived as Ben took a moment to study Noah, then said, “I’ve never seen that before. The Presence didn’t recognize you. You must not get out much.”

Noah squirmed in his seat. “I like my privacy.”

“Privacy is one thing...how are you securing that much anonymity?”

“I have my ways,” Noah said with a slight grin.

“Well, you look good. A little thin, but otherwise healthy.”

“Thanks. Two years clean. Not that you’d know.”

Ben let that comment pass without responding, but clearly Noah was not happy with him. “How did you do it?”

“Lots and lots of exercise. Dr. Cliff said that in order to counteract the endorphin high I got from taking Ephramin, which helped counteract the effects of telepatitis, I needed to get very active so as to release naturally occurring endorphins. Then, I slowly reduced my intake of Ephramin.”

“Sure, I remember Dr. Cliff recommending that, but I thought it sounded a bit too easy...but if it works...And the telepatitis...any permanent damage?”

“Thankfully, no. My liver’s still complaining, but Dr. Cliff said that should clear up, as well...*if* I stay away from trow pods.”

“For how long?”

“He recommends two more years. Then I should be able to go back to trowing.”

“But only twice per day, next time. You don’t want to get back into that situation again.”

“Yes, yes, mother. Twice per day trows, at least one hour apart.”

“I cannot tell you how many people think they can trow five, six times a day. Then, wham, they come down with telepatitis. Those trow rules are in place for a reason.”

“Okay, okay! I learned my lesson!” Noah’s blue eyes were offset by dark circles under them.

“The hard way.”

Noah changed the subject. “So I hear you’re working on the Moon City project. I saw you on the Presence at a meeting with Parliament.”

“Yeah, well, some members of Parliament. Didn’t go so well.”

“Yeah, I know, Noah said, smugly. “Well, I guess you can’t always be the Golden Boy.”

Ben looked at Noah a few moments. “Wow. Where did *that* come from.”

“I’m sorry. But it seems like you have time for everyone and everything...except me.”

“Noah, you know your doctor asked me to back off. He said you could only break the addiction on your own.”

“Yeah, but two years without a word? I can’t trow. I have to hear you’re in Chicago before you even think about coming around? Not even a holo-call.”

“Your doctor...I thought it best if we didn’t see each other for a while.”

“Don’t worry, Ben, I’m not going to threaten your new life with Robert Connor. It just would have been nice to see you once in a while.”

Ben turned his cup over and spilled coffee across the table; how did he know about Robert? A mechanical arrived within seconds to clean the table and bring him a fresh coffee. “I forgot about your expertise with the Presence. You’re spying on me.”

“I’m not... spying, exactly. I just came across a few things and put two and two together.”

“My Presence is set to the highest level of privacy. There’s no way you “just happened” to come across a few things.”

Noah watched a small spider crawling up outside the window adjacent to the booth. “The Presence is my job, Ben. You’ve always known that.”

“I know that you can get into almost anything on the Presence, but I thought you were done with all that and had gone legit.”

“I am legit. As a matter of fact I have a government contract. They have a list of certain...things they want me to look into. It’s for national security.”

“Are Robert and I on that list of *certain things*?”

Noah’s voice went about an octave higher. “What? Don’t be ridiculous. Who’d be interested in you two?”

“What about *your* list. Are we on your list?”

“I have no desire to get in the way of your happiness.” Noah could not look Ben in the eye. “If it can’t be me, I’m glad you found someone.”

Noah looked at Ben and wondered if Ben believed what he had just said to him. They both sat in silence a few moments.

“Noah. You know how I feel about you. You are very important to me. I think you are the most gifted person I’ve ever known; you’re one of only a handful of real, live human beings who can still get inside the Presence.”

“But...”

“There’s no ‘but’. We’ll always be friends...I hope.”

“The last two years sure don’t feel that way.”

“We’ll see each other more, now that you’re better.”

“And what about Robert?”

“What about him? He’s a great guy...you’d like him.”

“He’s not going to have a problem with your ex-boyfriend hanging around?”

“Robert is very secure. He already told me he wants to meet you. Look, we’ll all get together. Send me some open dates and we’ll meet for dinner...or a weekend hike. That might be good for all of us.” Ben didn’t want to push this little reunion; he felt it was time to go. He rose from the booth; Noah followed suit. “I have to go. Here, give me another hug.”

They hugged. Noah looked into the distance, memories of him and Ben in their Florida townhome filled his head. He longed for those days.

Ben broke the hug. "I'll see you again, very soon," he said. "Take care."

Noah smiled and nodded slightly.

Noah watched Ben call up a TaxiSkiin and glide off. He took a swig from his coffee, then headed for the rear exit. He felt his meeting with Ben had been very productive...for everyone. As he walked out of the coffee shop and boarded his Skiin, he called his contact. A voice with a British accent answered the call, but there was no image of the person, who obviously had the highest level of security settings on his persachip.

"Just checking in," Noah said.

"How did the meeting go?"

"Fine. Like old friends. He trusts me."

"You're certain he doesn't suspect anything. And Robert Connor?"

"I have a feeling that wherever Ben Barnett goes, so goes Robert Connor."

"Good. Contact me when you have a date and time."

Noah's Skiin moved across the park near his apartment, then turned down the pathway leading home.

"I will. But no one gets harmed, right? Just a little scare?"

There was only silence, then the call ended.

At the other end of the connection, the contact marked the call to be deleted. His persachip repeated the instructions, "Call log, John Abaddon/Noah Seven Asher, deleted."

“I told him we’d all get together, soon.” Ben said. He and Robert were walking down the hall of Ayn’s house, heading for Robert’s boyhood room.

“That’s great. Can’t wait to meet him.”

“Yeah.”

Robert stopped and turned to face Ben. “Do I have something to be wary of?”

“Of course not.”

Robert noticed Ben rubbing the back of his neck. “Then why so tense?”

“It’s just something about Noah. He seemed to know all about you – like he’s been checking into us.”

“What did he say?”

“It’s more like what he didn’t say.”

“I don’t follow.”

They continued to Robert’s room.

“Noah is a genius with the Presence. I’ve never seen anyone come close to his level. He had a great career with the Defense Department until his addiction took hold. Now I wonder how he spends his time. He’s very impressionable.”

Ayn’s house-cleaning digital was just exiting when Robert and Ben entered the large room. On one wall was a bed and two end tables, all in mahogany. On another wall sat a beige sofa. All four holo-walls were filled with memories of Robert’s teen years spent in the room. Debate trophies scrolled through one area, the corresponding certificates appearing behind each.

Ben took in all the holograms, then said, “Look at this! This was your room?” Ben paused a moment at the ‘Obama Award for Civic Debate’.

“Yes, this was my room. I guess Ayn set the holowalls to display all my old stuff.”

Ben approached the images of a skinny Robert as a teenager. In some he was working on school projects, in others he was with his family. One in particular caught Ben’s eye. He pointed to a collection of photos of Robert with his school soccer team.

“You didn’t tell me you played soccer.”

“I was no soccer hero, like you.”

“Looks like you were a defender.”



“Midfielder”, Robert corrected as he checked the closet to see how the digital had unpacked his clothes. He began reshuffling the clothes on their hangers so as to be in the order he liked. “Hal must have been reprogrammed...he used to know how to hang my clothes in a closet.”

“Hal?”

“Ayn likes to name her digitals...Rosie, Hal...I don’t know where she comes up with these names.”

Ben sat on the bed as he continued looking at the images. “Why did you stop playing?”

“I was off to college and wasn’t good enough to play on Princeton’s team.”

“That’s too bad”, Ben said as he swiped through the photo collections. “My time on the soccer team were some of the best of my life.”

“From what I’ve seen you could’ve played professionally. Teams always need talented goalies.”

“Yeah, well, a torn ligament put an end to that idea.”

“A torn ligament? That’s all? Couldn’t they repair it?”

“They tried, but Trow Medical Surgery was still in its infancy; they kind of botched the job.”

“You don’t seem to have any residual effects.”

“Yeah, it healed nicely... over time,” Ben said as he massaged his leg.

“Is that why you went to medical school?”

“Not really.” Ben took a moment to reflect; was he really ready to open up old wounds for a guy he had been seeing only a few months? “Yeah”, he thought, “it’s Robert, the man I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.” He took a deep breath and let it out as he moved to the sofa. “I had this grandiose, misguided idea that I could cure my Mom.”

Robert joined Ben on the sofa. “Was her BA bad early on?”

“Yeah. It began very slowly...when I was 14. They’ve made a lot of progress over the years to prolong lives and slow the progression, but still no cure.”

Robert was 14 when he lost his parents. “I know how difficult it is to grow up without a parent, but that must have been particularly difficult.”

“She’s always needed a lot of care. My Dad did most of the heavy lifting. He’s always been there for her...for all of us.”

“Why *did* you change majors?”

Ben continued to peruse the projections on the walls. “I saw I wasn’t really cut out for medicine...I can’t stay still long enough to absorb all those minute details. Besides, it’s the digital doctors having all the fun. I didn’t want to spend all my time agreeing with the diagnoses of digital. I wanted more adventure in my life. And it’s kind of a one-town career...I much prefer to get out, to see the world, to meet people.”

“I’m glad you did.” Robert put his arm around Ben. “So you thought about a State Department job even then – even before Special Forces.”

“I don’t know what I thought about. I only knew that with a Political Science degree my life would be larger than it would be in St. Paul.”

“Clearly that worked out for you.”

“Yeah, but not so much for Mom...or Dad. I’ve been traveling a lot these past 15 years. Now Dad’s getting on and needs more help with Mom.”

Robert rubbed the back of Ben’s head and neck. “When did they move to Key West?”

“Five years ago...I thought the quiet and climate on Key West would do them both some good. Plus I can look in on them when I am home.”

“And now I can pitch in a little.”

“Robert you know I’d never expect you to have to...”

Robert broke in the middle of Ben’s thought. “You *haven’t* asked. I’m glad to help. Look, I would give anything to have my parents still with me. It would make me feel like a son, again.”

Ben turned to Robert and kissed him. “You’re a good man, Robert Connor.”

Ben rose and began undressing to take a shower.

Robert said, “I’m getting a pretty good one, myself.”

“Join me?” Ben said, looking at Robert, with one eyebrow raised and a devilish grin.

Robert was tempted. “I better check in with the office.”

As Ben showered, Robert answered a few messages, then checked the Presence news. He chose four stories to express from his persachip. He watched the corresponding videos which accompanied the news items. One in particular made him take notice.

*“The body of another government employee was found today near the peak of Mount Everest. Rajim Mouhadi, a mid-level executive working at the Defense Department, disappeared a week ago after having lunch in Crystal City. The body was pulled from a crevasse; the man was*

*located through his persachip, which was still active. All evidence indicates he was deliberately trown 45 meters to the bottom of the crevasse. Mr. Mouhadi marks the 8<sup>th</sup> government employee to disappear in the past year, and the first disappearance since authorities in the United Kingdom insisted they had arrested four men they said were responsible for the disappearances. Investigators believe all victims were trown. They are looking into exactly how these trows could occur. A search of pod logs proved futile. Fereday has promised full cooperation with the investigation. There are no leads as of yet, but one Defense Department spokesman, when asked about the portable trow pods project at Fereday, denied their use was possible. Additionally, a Fereday Executive, speaking under condition of anonymity, said that the portable trow pods project was a failure and that there is no possibility the next-generation trow pods were used. "The portable trow project has been shelved. The project requires more research and testing. We believe site-to-site trowing is at least five years away." The President has asked Global Security to put together a special team to investigate. Mr. Mouhadi is survived by his wife, Amahla, and three children."*

The video showed the body of the victim being removed from the crevasse, then cut to an empty park bench in Crystal City, where the victim was last seen, showed stock footage of Fereday's Mexico City offices, then a shot of the White House. The video ended with a photo of the victim.

Robert spoke to his persachip. "Mark this item for follow-up next week."

The persachip repeated his request, "One item marked for follow-up."

"And send a copy to Benjamin Barnett."

"Copy sent", came the reply.

Ben came into the room, a towel wrapped around his waist. His lean, muscular body was enviable to anyone of 36 years. Robert began undressing for his own shower, neatly folding each article of clothing as he went. "I sent you an interesting item about Fereday."

"The Moon project?"

"Not exactly. Take a look." Robert walked to the bathroom to take his shower. Ben flopped on the bed and made a request to his persachip.

"Open my messages."

"You have 14 new messages."

“Express message from Robert Connor.”

The message was downloaded and instantly expressed to him. Ben knew the contents as well as if he had read the news item and viewed the video. He was troubled by Fereday being mentioned and was aware of the portable trow pods problems. But the fact that eight people had disappeared, along with Bill Renders’, troubled him. Was there a connection?

“Search the Presence for items regarding Fereday, the U.S.C. government, and deaths of government employees.”

Immediately came the reply, “Two items regarding those three parameters were found.” Ben looked at the two news items, both of which he was already aware. He rolled over on his back and looked up at the ceiling, thinking. He decided there was no connection between the disappearances. Still, he had learned of two deaths of people he knew, in the last two days. He closed his eyes for a few moments. Should he do something? Should he upend his life and run off to play soldier? Ben had felt torn, before, but never in this way. How could he walk away from friends and colleagues who seemed to believe he should take action? Where was the balance. He’d finally found the love of his life; he was certain he wasn’t going to walk away from that. They were questions that gnawed on him and made him once again contemplate his life choices.

Robert came into the room wrapped in his towel. He sat on the bed next to Ben. Robert was a self-anointed ‘desk jockey’, but he kept himself in good shape with Tai-Kwon-Do workouts four times per week; he had a biker’s calves. His blue eyes offset his coal black hair, which even wet was thick and wavy. Ben very much liked his sharp facial features. “Did you get that news item?”

“I did,” Ben said, tugging on Robert’s towel, trying to distract himself.

“What do you think?”

“I think I like what I see.”

“I mean about the news item.” Robert was trying to keep to the subject, but he couldn’t help admiring the handsome man lying just a few centimeters from him.

“I think I’ll talk to Norberg about it when I see her.”

Robert laid on the bed next to Ben and crossed one leg over his. Both looked up at the ceiling, where was projected a map of the universe.

“I hope you’d be a little more concerned if I disappeared”, Robert said.

Ben took Robert's hand. "You *know* I'd never let that happen. I'll be taking care of you when you are old and decrepit...like Bock."

"Bock?"

"*Bock's Paradise?*", Ben said with an incredulous look on his face. He sat up. "You've never read *Bock's Paradise*? It's my favorite book."

"'Fraid I don't know it."

Ben loved to be able, for once, to share something Robert didn't already know.

"It's about an American woman who gives up everything to be with her lover, Edmund, during the quarantine years in England."

Ben accessed the book on his persachip, his hand on Robert's chest.

"This is my favorite passage, when she is very sick with the virus."

Ben recited it aloud.

*'I will never know how I became the fortunate recipient of Edmund's love. It seems to be a love without bounds, without doubt, without end. I often ask myself, "Why me?" Surely there are others more deserving, more giving. But, ironically, in the same way that I give myself over to the virus, I give myself over to the love, allowing its metamorphosizing effects to slowly make their way into my body, my life.*

*And now I fight for that love. Precious moments spent with Edmund free me of the surety of my passing. How long will it last – the disease? How long will it last – the love? We say 'til the end', but it is meaningless. We don't know when will be the end; we only cling to the moments of love, the moments of clarity, and tend to disregard the moment at the end.'*

"You think we'll end up like that?" asked Robert.

"I hope to find out."

"Then I can't wait to grow old with you."

Ben laughed. "I think we have a few more years before we have to start replacing body parts."

"I don't want a thing about you to change."

"Don't worry, I'll always be me and I'll always be here to take care of you, no matter how many body parts wear out."

Robert looked Ben in the eye. "Just don't ever leave me...I don't think I could live through that, again."

“You won’t have to...I promise”

Robert stroked Ben’s arm. “I didn’t think I would ever love again. But I do, and in many ways even more than before.”

Ben turned to face Robert and said, “I love you.”

They kissed. Robert then rolled over on top of Ben as they kissed several times more. Their towels came away from their bodies and they both felt the electric charge of skin on skin. Robert stroked Ben’s hair, then reached down and placed his hand around Ben’s waist to pull him close. Robert said, “Dim the lights”, and the lights in the room lowered as the soon-to-be husbands slipped under the covers.

“No, no! Measure 135 is sotto voce! Does anyone here know what sotto voce means?”

Every hand in the orchestra went up. The conductor went stone still a moment, then threw down his baton and nearly tripped off the rostrum as he retreated to his office and left the orchestra sitting silent. Two flautists giggled.

The Concertmaster said, “Okay, everyone, 20 minutes.” The orchestra members began filing out of the rehearsal room.

Before joining the others on break, Petir Tromsky fitted a new reed onto his oboe. He wiped the instrument clean, then gently placed it down onto its holder. He joined his colleagues in line at the coffee-Maker just as a call came in over his persachip. The persachip informed him that the call was from “Green Seasons”, which Tromsky knew meant the call actually was from Global Security. He walked out into the hallway before accepting the call.

Tromsky was tall and thin; running kept him fit, and it was something he could do when traveling, which he did a lot. His hair had turned prematurely gray, which made him look older than his 38 years and helped him keep his cover as merely a respected oboist. Not one person outside Global Security, not his wife, not his children, not his mother, nor anyone else on Earth, he believed, knew he was an agent for the U.S.C. – ‘information gatherer’ as he liked to think of it. His cover as a lead oboist for the Chicago Philharmonic allowed him to travel around the world on missions for his country. He had been recruited in London a year earlier when the Philharmonic played a concert at Elizabeth Hall celebrating the end of the quarantine. His latest mission had been to obtain intel on several Turkish officials when the orchestra performed there. Unfortunately, Tromsky unknowingly had given away his identity when the still-green U.S.C. agent failed to set his persachip to “special privacy” a few months back. Colony Dominion had no problem hacking into his personal database.

In the hallway Tromsky spoke as if people were all around him, listening in, even though no one else could hear his conversation.

“Yes?”

“We have instructions. Meet at Trow Pod CC732, Oak Woods Cemetery, Chicago, tomorrow morning at 5:30.”

“Are previous instructions rescinded?”

“All instructions remain in place.”

“Can’t the new instructions be sent to my persachip?”

“We require in-person delivery.” A personal-delivery instruction might have raised a red flag in the mind of a more seasoned operative, but Tromsky didn’t give it a second thought. He repeated the meeting location. “Trow Pod CC732, 5:30.”

The caller added, “No further contact”, then the call disconnected. Tromsky did wonder why his previous instructions were not rescinded, but did not think long about it and returned to rehearsal.

The next day at 7:48 AM, Tromsky’s body was found floating in the fountain in front of the Oak Woods Cemetery.

Barton Smythe took a bite of his donut while the woman opposite him warned about going against John Abaddon.

“Remember what happened to Ronan Cortile.”

“I remember all too well. He was a respected member of Parliament; he did not deserve that fate. That’s why I must say something.”

The woman said, “Cortile was getting in the way of everything we are working for. You still believe in the Empire, don’t you?”

Smythe was indignant. “I am a founding member of Colony Dominion. I was working to restore the Empire long before you and Alun Hughes were around.”

The woman, Karen Heald, was an assistant to Lord Speaker Hughes. Her position was arguably more powerful than Smythe’s. “Let’s face it, Barton, no one here is going to challenge Abaddon. Not me, and certainly not you.”

Barton Smythe’s pale face turned red. He placed his half-eaten donut on the table. “Is that so? You think I won’t stand up to him?”

“You, least of all,” Heald said with a grunting chuckle.

Smythe threw his head back and looked around the room; his entire face was now beet red. “Someone must. I cannot let this situation go unchallenged.”



“We’re here to save our Empire. We all know what that means and we all knew what we were signing on to.”

“I didn’t know we would be attending the funerals of our own colleagues. Who’s next? You? Me?”

“Why are you so certain it is our own organization behind the disappearances?”

“Ronan Cortile disappears on his way to a campaign meeting. Terry O’Sullivan hasn’t been heard from in five days. Both worked to sign agreements with other Global Sovereigns, exactly the kind of thing we are trying to stop. That is not what I signed on for, and I intend to stop it.”

Smythe saw John Abaddon talking with two other Colony Dominion members. When he approached Abaddon the two other members sidled away.

“John, have you heard about all the disappearances, lately?”

“Good morning to you, too, Barton. Yes, I have heard.” Abaddon stood stiffly still.

“What do you think is going on?”

“Well, I’m not certain...what do *you* think is going on, Barton?”

Smythe thought for a moment that he might give up this line of questioning and move on, but over-confidence propelled him forward. “It looks as if those who oppose our goal of reunification are being pushed aside.”

“All is as it should be.” Abaddon stood silent a moment. He felt his initial distrust of Barton Smythe had been justified. He then asked, “Is there something wrong with that?”

“John, if anyone suspects that Colony Dominion has anything to do with all this...”

“And why would anyone think such a thing? Have you been talking to someone about it?”

“No, *no!* I would never...John what are we doing here?”

“We’re working towards our common goal of putting the Empire back together, the way it was meant to be.”

Smythe put his hand to his forehead. “But at what cost, John? How far are we going to take this?”

Abaddon again stood in silence as he attempted to discern Smythe’s mindset. He adjusted his shirt sleeve. “We will take this to its logical conclusion.”

“But...” Smythe looked around to see if anyone was listening. “...people are dying, John. They’re dying! We can’t be held responsible for those deaths. I really think...” Smythe stopped and looked at Abaddon.

“What?” Abaddon said. “What do you really think?”

“I’m just not certain I can be a part of...”

“Of *what*, Barton? You keep insinuating something. Out with it...what are you thinking?”

“If Colony Dominion is...if we are responsible for any of these deaths...well, I’m sorry, John, but I don’t think I can be a part of it.”

Abaddon knew he had to handle this situation delicately. He had learned the hard way that a lost ally can quickly become a liability. He knew he had to reassure Smythe. He put his hand on Smythe’s shoulder and smiled. “Barton, you’ve been slodering too many mystery novels. We are simply here to work together to ensure our nation continues to recover from the quarantine as quickly and completely as we can. Do you believe doing away with one another is the most effective strategy?”

“I only thought...”

“Now, Barton, don’t give this conspiracy theory of yours another thought. Let’s get to work to save our great Empire...together. Shall we? You are an integral part of our plans and we cannot lose you to back-alley prattle.”

“I’m sorry, John. I guess all that talk on the Presence has gotten to me.”

“Well, don’t let it. Let’s get this meeting started, shall we?”

“Okay, John.”

Smythe began to walk toward his seat. Abaddon turned to Kenneth Leith and caught his eye. He then looked to Smythe, drawing Leith’s attention to him. Leith looked toward Smythe and raised his eyebrows. Abaddon nodded once and silently mouthed, “Yes.”

Smythe disappeared the next day. 43 years later, as it was being demolished, Smythe’s body was found inside the stone and concrete foundation of the old Beckdale Artificial Intelligence office building.

Mary Cassanova Darlington pioneered the use of plaztik as a fabric. Early on, plaztik, the ‘miracle material’, had been used in industrial applications, such as coverings for trow pods, awnings, even roofs. But its highly adaptable nature allowed for it to be used in all kinds of applications: as a soft floor covering, in household appliances, furniture, and, thanks to Darlington fabrics, as an adaptable clothing fabric. With her introduction of Plaztik fabrics Darlington built

her fashion house into an empire, making plaztik the modern material used by all. Plaztik could be made soft or hard, shiny or matt finished, and in any color; it could even change shape and color on a whim. Plaztik was recyclable, reusable, and became the de facto material used in what were formerly called 3D printers, and then 'Insta-Makers', but which came to be known as, simply, 'Maker'. One home Maker was capable of fabricating 60% of all household necessities, including food products and clothing. Darlington introduced Plaztik fabrics to the world; they became the go-to materials for everything from casual wear to formals, and Darlington had a valuable contract with the U.K. government to provide armed services uniforms.

Darlington's Locale boasted 38% of clothing patterns sold in the world. Virtually every woman, man, and child on Earth had at least one replicated outfit of Darlington's. Makers had an automatic link to Darlington's Locale. To stay up with the latest fashion, one needed only to subscribe to Darlington's Fashion Club and each week the latest and most popular fashions would be downloaded into the club member's Maker, which then replicated a perfect-fitting outfit.

Darlington was a huge supporter of global sovereignty, urging her friends in Parliament to consider the U.K. becoming part of the U.S.C. She made a lot of enemies at home in the U.K. with that position, but her global market share continued to increase.

Two days before her annual fashion show, Darlington disappeared. Her body was never found.

Ben and Robert walked hand-in-hand up the narrow cobblestone steps leading to the piazza in Sirolo, Italy, which over-looked the Adriatic Sea, below. Sandy beaches edged the sea that filled their vision 180°, summer tourists lining the beaches working on their tans. The piazza was wrapped on the Adriatic side by a stone fence that was built to keep curious 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century tourists from falling over the cliff, but now is maintained only for aesthetic reasons; a force field protects anyone from falling the 125 meters to the beach. Two sides of the piazza were lined with ancient Roman buildings that 800 years earlier served as homes, then morphed into restaurants and shops selling all manner of tourist goods. The air was crisp with the scent of honey-yellow ginestra that dotted the terraced hills just below the piazza. They could detect the faint buzz of thousands of mini-drones above the terraced hills, harvesting sunflowers.

The ageless charm of Sirolo, with its cobblestone streets and stone facades, was barely interrupted but for a group of tourists from France, several digital humans working a couple of restaurants, and a gelato shop located in the center of the piazza. Two local girls whizzed around the piazza on their Skiins.

“First stop, gelato,” said Ben, leading Robert to the open-air gelato shop.

“Why am I not surprised.”

“Well, if you don’t want any...”, said Ben.

“Stracciatella,” came Robert’s rapid reply.

Ben approached the counter and placed his order. “Un cono di Stracciatella e una coppa di due gusti, fior di latte e cioccolato.”

“I didn’t know you spoke Italian,” Robert said. When did you learn that? I didn’t think anyone bothered to learn a language anymore, what with our persachips ready to translate.”

“A little lesson from my diplomatic days. People accord more trust and respect when you speak in their own language using your own voice.”

The DH placed a cone full of chocolate chip gelato and a cup with vanilla and chocolate on the counter above the glass-front freezer. “Besides, I wanted to impress you. Did I?”

“Everything you do impresses me.”

“Yeah, but will you be so impressed in 30 years?” Ben told his persachip, “Send payment to Gelato Piazza, Sirolo.”

Ben and Robert walked across the piazza to sit on a bench overlooking the Adriatic Sea. They could faintly hear the waves crashing against the rocks at the base of Monte Conero.

“It’s been a good couple of weeks, hasn’t it?” Ben asked.

“Except for that little incident yesterday I could not be happier, Benjamin Barnett.”

“I thought we weren’t going to ever talk about that again!” said Ben, chuckling.

Robert placed his hand on the back of Ben’s neck, then leaned in to kiss him. “I thought I would never feel this way again.”

Ben looked straight into Robert’s eyes. They kissed again.

Another couple entered the piazza, ordered from the same gelato shop, then sat on the next bench over to Robert and Ben’s. They were apparently on their honeymoon, as well. As they shared their own kiss, Ben asked, “Do you think we look as corny?”

Robert looked at the couple, then said, “I don’t care what we look like. I love you and don’t care who knows it!”

Ben’s persachip interrupted. “You have a call from Fereday Space Corporation in Mexico City, Mexico.”

Ben was annoyed and said, “Please reject the call.”

“It is marked ‘urgent’, sir. It’s Ms. Norberg.”

Ben looked at Robert, begging forgiveness. His eyes opened wide and his lower lip tucked under his upper one. “Put it through.”

Cheryl Norberg’s hologram appeared before them. “Sorry to bother you, Ben, but you know I wouldn’t if it wasn’t important.”

Cheryl, this is my husband, Robert Conner.

“Nice to finally meet you, Robert. I apologize for this.”

Robert was gracious. “Knowing your reputation, Ms. Norberg, I know this must be an important call.”

“It is.”

Robert stood and walked a few paces from the bench in order to give Ben and Norberg some privacy.

“Ben, in the two weeks you’ve been away three of our leading engineers have disappeared. We were unable to contact them through their persachips, and the Presence couldn’t locate them. Then, in the past two days, two of them were found. Parks Munroe’s body turned up in the Gobi

desert, and Paul Farsman's was located floating in space, about 100 kilometers from Moon Pod 33."

Ben immediately thought of Bill Renders, the missing man from the Atlantis project. "What do you think happened?" He looked to Robert and waved him to return; Robert stood behind Ben.

"We just don't know. But we're worried this is some kind of conspiracy against Fereday. There are a lot of factions out there intent on stopping the Moon project."

Ben thought a moment, then said, "Let me ask you something: Do you think this has anything to do with Bill Renders' disappearance?"

"It looks a lot like the same M.O. I always felt there was more going on there, but we were unable to dig up any information. Now I'm convinced that we have several murders on our hands...and there may be more to come. We all may be targets. I'm calling everyone into a meeting about this. Ben, we kinda' need you back here."

Ben looked up at Robert, who put his hand on Ben's back and rubbed it.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Thank you...both of you. We'll make this up to you."

As Norberg's image faded Ben turned to Robert.

"I hate this."

"I know...so do I. What do you think is going on?"

"I don't know", Ben said as they walked to the overlook, "but it's getting very serious."

"But shouldn't this be a police matter?"

"If there's a problem with the new trow pods, we need to fix it. If someone has found a way to hack into them, that's even worse. Besides, they were all friends of mine...Renders, Munroe, Farsman. And there were a few in the government, too, that have gone missing. I've been thinking this wasn't just a Fereday problem, and now I'm pretty certain of it. Still, the common denominator is that they disappeared after trowing. We need to get to the bottom of this."

"Maybe you should speak with Maria Verdugo again."

"You think I should take that position at State?"

"It would certainly give you more leverage."

Ben looked down on the beach, again. He could almost feel himself floating in the water and absorbing the sun's rays. "I don't mind attending a meeting, but I'm not going to get involved

in the investigation. I think we can handle things from Fereday. And I don't want us to start out by being apart for two years."

"Whatever you decide, I'm on your side. Just be careful."

"Do you want to stay? I could be back tomorrow."

Robert looked at Ben with a grin. "Famous last words. Besides, what am I going to do in Sirolo, alone?"

"Then I guess I'll see you at home in a couple of days?"

"I'll be there...we'll pick up this honeymoon where we left off."

The easiness with which Robert accepted the situation impressed Ben even more. He placed his hands on either side of Robert's head and drew him in for a long, good-bye kiss.

Taking Robert's left hand, Ben said, "I love you."

As Ben walked toward the trow pod at the far end of the piazza, he replied "I love you, too."

Ben then disappeared into the pod. Robert leaned on the old stone wall and peered down to the crowded beach below and sighed.

Ben arrived at Fereday's Mexico City offices and stepped outside the trow pod, one of 14 on the campus. The Fereday Corporation had built and moved into their new Mexico City offices only two years earlier. It was the culmination of a long search for where to locate their new technology campus, chosen for a number of reasons, only one of which was the work Mexico had achieved building carbon scrubbers.

The Fereday campus was a modern example of what could be achieved by artificial intelligence and digital humans, mechanicals, and robots. Mechanicals were everywhere on the grounds of Fereday, mowing lawns, trimming trees, repairing walkways, and indoors as well, mopping floors, cleaning offices and restrooms, and cleaning and dusting hallways. Robots built Fereday products, such as Fereday Space components and trow pods. Digital Humans were utilized where a more human-like visage was desired. They roamed the hallways delivering packages, babysat Fereday employees' children in the daycare facility, and were the first faces seen by visitors to the sprawling campus. Fereday also tested out new products at the campus. In waiting rooms, force-fields were being combined with holograms to produce holographic furniture that could be sat on. The employee gym featured several pieces of holographic workout equipment. Outdoors, holographic Skiins were being tested to replace the real things. And a small community of holographic buildings was nestled into one corner of the campus where several employees and their families lived. In the testing stage was holographic clothing; the project was still being fleshed out in private due to numerous and embarrassing test failures. In the future the entire population of the world might live completely virtual lives, with almost everything formerly 'real' and tactile recreated in holographic form.

Ben always marveled at all the activity going on on campus. As he looked around he saw Cheryl Norberg gliding toward him, seemingly floating in the air as she arrived on one of the experimental holographic hoverboards.

"Cheryl!" Ben was a little surprised to see Norberg meet him right at the pod. "I was just headed to your office."

"I'm not taking any chances. With what's been going on I wanted to be certain you arrived safely."

"It's that serious?" They began walking towards Norberg's office.



“Parks Munroe was a lead engineer on the project to expand the trow pods range. Paul Farsman worked on the portable pods project. Both of them were important to Fereday and the future of trowing; both men are now dead, and I want to know why.”

“You think their disappearances are connected?”

“I do.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m putting together an investigative team. That’s what this meeting is about. Farsman and Munroe aren’t the only two Fereday executives gone missing. You yourself mentioned Bill Renders.”

“Yeah, I’ve never felt right about the circumstances surrounding Renders’ disappearance and death.”

“And not only those three, but we’ve noticed a number of other people who have mysteriously disappeared in the last year or so.”

Norberg stopped a mechanical refrigerator moving through the halls and asked for two bottles of water. She tossed one to Ben. Ben opened his water, took a swig, then said, “I’ve noticed at least eight disappearances in the last year.”

“It’s not only the fact that they disappeared, but it’s also the timing. We’ve noticed their disappearances coincided with other disappearances around the world.”

“What do you mean?”

Norberg carried her water bottle without opening it. “There have been a number of U.S.C. officials who have also disappeared. Some prominent, some not so prominent, all of them important, and taken together you start to see a pattern.”

“I heard about the Pentagon General...did they ever figure out what happened?”

“No, and they never found any sign of her.”

“You said there were others?”

Norberg began reciting the names of people from all walks of life who had disappeared in the past year. “Shel Cliffords, who worked in the London Embassy, Marth Newbins of “Presence News”, and Brook Bierly, an employee at the State Department.”

Ben nearly popped a blood vessel when his head shot up upon hearing the news about his old colleague. “Brook Bierly? I know him; I used to work with him. I just saw him a couple of months ago! Cheryl, what happened?”

“Well, this is classified...his body was discovered floating in space, halfway between here and the Moon.”

Ben turned white and seemed almost to be thrown off his feet. He thought to Brook’s wife and daughter and how Brook had worried about his daughter’s safety. After a moment he returned his attention to Norberg.

“Why hasn’t any of this been picked up by the Presence? It should have noticed these disappearances and reported it.”

“It appears that whoever is behind these disappearances has some control over the Presence.”

“I thought there were protocols set up to prevent anyone from doing that.”

“Well, if someone is manipulating the Presence, he or she is a genius on it, that’s for certain.”

Ben’s mind went to Noah for a split second, but the thought of Brook Bierly pulled his attention. “Floating halfway to the Moon. But how? Our pods have too many safety protocols for that to happen.”

As Norberg spoke, Ben rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s what we must figure out...how are they doing this?”

“And who?”

“That’s why I called you back. The government has asked us to join them in an investigation; I said we would put someone on it. With your background at the State Department and Special Forces I thought you could head up the investigation from our end, and coordinate with the government.”

They reached Norberg’s office and stopped. Ben’s first thought was that it would be great to be back in mission-mode, like he was during his Special Forces stint. But then he pushed that to the back of his mind. He thought to himself, “You can’t play soldier games your whole life.”

“Cheryl, I don’t think I’m the right person for this.”

“Ben you’re the most tenacious person I know. You dig in with both hands and you don’t quit. I, and apparently Maria Verdugo...and even President Montgomery agree with me.” Norberg motioned to the meeting room across from her office. “Your team is waiting inside.”

It was beginning to take all Ben had to keep rejecting the requests made of him. “I just got married, and my mother is not getting any better. I’d be too distracted. I’m afraid I’d let you down.”

Ben was feeling more indecisive than he ever had. His entire life he had prided himself on his ability to keep moving forward.

“If you feel you really cannot take this on...”

“I just cannot do it.” He felt like a traitor to himself. “What about Becky O’Hearn? She’s good on the Presence and she’s relentless.”

“If you change your mind...”

“Of course.” Ben had now turned down three very important people who had asked for his help. His eyes wandered the room; he was feeling lost and torn. He wanted to help find his colleagues and friends, and to stop the disappearances, but was reluctant to alter the course of his life. There were people who needed him. His country needed him. He wondered if he was being selfish. He wondered if he was not being selfish enough.

Norberg approached the holographic doors to the meeting room – another Fereday project; the doors vanished and she entered. Ben stood alone in the hallway, still rubbing his neck. It took all his will not to follow her into the meeting.

Aldrich Taylor sat at the old wood table and sipped his tea. He leaned into Powell Rubens. “We stayed here when I was a child, visiting my Aunt Paris, who lived nearby. I’m all for technology and the advantages we enjoy from it these days, but it does seem we have also lost something.”

“And what is that?”

“A sense of place, a sense of who we are as British people. I used to love being away from home overnight, sleeping in another city, visiting small villages by the sea. But that is no more. I suppose the truth is we don’t really need hotels any longer, do we? Trowing has sealed the coffin of many industries, and I guess it won’t be long before the accommodations industry disappears completely.”

In truth, hotels and inns still existed, especially in more remote locations – if any place on Earth still could be called remote, with teletransportation making accessible virtually every corner of the planet. And there was still a lot of call for rooms rented by the hour. But none of that was Taylor’s point.

Rubens responded, “Yes, well, it’s not their loss that has caused our downfall. You can thank the United States and Countries for that. Something you should remember.” Powell Rubens sported an anchor beard and short-cropped black hair. He was a natty dresser, paying particular attention to his clothing accessories. He was never seen without cufflinks, giving him an air of modernity while at the same time seeming to emerge from a men’s clothing catalogue of 100 years earlier.

“Of course, of course,” said Taylor, anxious not to be perceived as anything less than 100% behind Colony Dominion’s mission. He had seen the results of not living up to that mission. “I only hope we can rediscover who we are and return to being the great Empire we were meant to be.”

The apartment in which they were meeting was compact, fashioned from three of the former *Clerk and Well Pub and Inn’s* rooms. It retained much of its 21<sup>st</sup> Century ambience with its stuccoed walls and wood floors and exposed timber-beam ceiling. They could still detect the stale-sweet aroma of salvaged timber from an old shipwreck off the coast of Brighton that was used to build the inn 300 years earlier. The old floors creaked as the Colony Dominion members slowly migrated to their seats.

Karen Heald checked the time by looking at her wrist where in the past a watch might have been strapped. Her persachip recognized the gesture and announced, "10:48 AM". A persachip could be taught to recognize any gesture the user wished, to signify anything from telling the time to making a call to ordering dinner. Heald liked the 'old' gestures that evoked in her a sense of the past. Others preferred simply thinking of what it was they wanted to do and allowing their persachip to perform the task for them.

All members of Colony Dominion had been seated for more than 15 minutes when Heald said, "Maybe John's not coming. I'll check." She spoke to her persachip. "Locate John Abaddon."

The persachip responded, "John Abaddon, persachip set to 'special private'".

"I figured as much," she said to no one in particular.

The pub's DH returned with a second round of coffee, tea and water.

The room was buzzing with multiple conversations about their home or work lives or about the mission of Colony Dominion.

Finally, Kenneth Leith rose and drew everyone's attention to the head of the table. John Abaddon suddenly appeared before them. Believing this was a holocall, no one thought anything of it. Then he shook hands with Agnetha Hart, seated to his right.

"John!" Hart recoiled her hand; she looked around the room to see if others were aware of what had occurred. "John...how did you get here? Where's the trow pod?"

Abaddon carried a small device, which he placed on the table.

Immediately the room was abuzz with murmuring and gasps of surprise. Leith tried to calm them. "Quiet, quiet. Mr. Abaddon will explain."

Abaddon sat; his demeanor was relaxed and confident. He had elicited just the reaction he sought. He gestured with his hand to present the device to the members.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the future of the British Empire, now firmly within our grasps. We, the loyal members of Colony Dominion, are the great hope of our Empire. We have come a long way, but we have only just begun to restore the British Empire to what it once was, and shall be again. The quarantine years will soon be seen as a mere bump in the road. With the completion of our mission we will become the next Global Sovereign and one day will be a towering force to be reckoned with. We will not sit idly by while China, EuroZ, the African Nations, the South Americas, and the almighty United States and Countries continue to expand,

stealing our lands and wrecking our economy.” The way Abaddon said *United States and Countries* left a bad taste in their mouths. Abaddon fell into his ‘great leader’ speech mode.

“This meeting falls on a particular anniversary of our efforts for our Empire. We have worked two years to reach this point in our mission. I have toured this country as a simple public speaker, and I learned from the people that we must have a new revolution. The elements of confusion and dissolution which are making themselves felt in British life cannot be eradicated by a return to the old ways. We seek essential change. The traditional custodians of our government are incapable of carrying out this revolution; they seek only the status quo. We cannot doubt that the past 28 years have passed like a storm over the Empire. For hundreds of years our Empire prevailed through, not talk, but action. Action to defeat and eliminate those forces that stood in the way of our great nation.”

Abaddon picked up the device lying on the table; he displayed it in both his outstretched hands, as if presenting a newborn prince.

“We now have in our hands the power to act. We face certain individuals who are blind to the actual state of world affairs; they have refused to submit to the practical application of our principles. Not only those individuals in our own ranks who refuse to act, but those globally who have stood in our way. This will come to an end.

Unspeakable suffering and misery have come upon our people because we lost the instinct for survival which was grounded in our intuition; caused by a wrong and lopsided condescension. I can prophesy that the Revolution of the Empire will bring about a revelatory change in our future.

This will not bring about an estrangement between the Global Sovereigns; it will bring about a true understanding of who we are and what we can achieve. But our revolution is not yet fully understood by our contemporaries. They talk of cooperation and compromise. We speak of authority and hegemony. It is the only path to our salvation. With infallible certainty we are steering towards a rebirth of our Empire. The results of our rebirth will be:

- 1) The expansion of the British Empire throughout the world.
- 2) The will of the British Empire to find expression in global sovereignty.
- 3) The realization that there can be only one Global British Empire.

This revolution can only be a result of carrying a fundamental axiom of the British Empire to its full effect; only through the successful issue of this revolution will the people of the British

Empire once again rule over lands deemed ours centuries ago. This is the outcome Providence had in mind when it created the Empire.

All of you understand the meaning of what we say here. It will be for us to gather the whole of the British people to our revolution. But we must first act to affect the change required to build momentum for our movement.

That is why we are here, today. The next few months will be challenging, but if we focus on our mission, we will see our revolution to fruition. And the means of my arrival today will be the means to our victory.”

Abaddon again picked up the device; he wielded it like a weapon. It was 25 centimeters long, reminiscent of a long-barreled flashlight, with an aperture capable of expanding and contracting. Abaddon held it up once more for all to see and for all to understand the power with which Abaddon imbued it.

“The days of pod-to-pod trowing are now history. With this *portable* trow device we can cleanly and efficiently eliminate those who continue to stand in our way. Mr. Taylor, do you mind?”

Aldrich Taylor stood slowly, uncertain of Abaddon’s intent. Abaddon pointed the device at Taylor and pulled the trigger. Taylor flinched, convinced the device was a laser weapon. A foggy beam of blue light hit Taylor, encompassing him from head to toe; he disappeared. The frightened members of Colony Dominion gasped and whispered to each other.

“Where is he?”

“Is he dead?”

“Is that a laser weapon?”

Abaddon ordered his persachip to contact Taylor. Taylor’s holographic image appeared above the table.

“Aldrich! Please tell everyone where you are.”

Taylor, dressed in only thin, beige slacks and a white shirt, crossed his arms across his chest and began rubbing them, all the while looking around. The fear on his face was palpable. “I don’t know! I don’t know where I am...Antarctica?”

“Very good, Mr. Taylor.” Abaddon then switched off the call and Aldrich Taylor’s image slowly faded away. The room was dead quiet. A smirk broke out on Powell Ruben’s face. From

the pub below they could hear the faint sound of the holographic band playing *When We Are in the Tavern*.

Abaddon finally broke the silence. “Those who stand in our way will be cleanly and efficiently eliminated.” Abaddon’s wide eyes looked slowly around the room. “Any questions?”

Abaddon surveyed for signs of weakness on the faces of his colleagues, who all tried desperately to hide any indication they might not be 100% supportive of the cause. No one wanted to end up like Aldrich Taylor.

“Then I can safely assume we are all in this together.”

All eyes were sharply focused on Abaddon.

“Good. Now! On to the next phase of our mission. I have just sent you your plan of action. Please note the due date of each action item and please be certain to adhere to those dates.”

Each meeting attendee expressed their plan of action; they instantly knew what was expected of them. No one dared balk, but some wondered what they had gotten themselves into.

“The time for meetings and planning has come to an end.” Abaddon picked up the portable trow device again. He gently turned it over in his hands several times, as if it were a precious jewel. “We have been testing our new weapon, with very encouraging results. Soon it will be time to put our plans into action. Achieve our goals and we will become an integral part of the future of our great empire. I needn’t explain further where we all end up if we fail.”

Abaddon looked slowly around the room. He smirked, then spoke to his persachip, “Mr. Arbro.” A moment later Aldrich Taylor was standing in the room, shivering and slapping his arms together. No Colony Dominion member rose to help him. Mr. Arbro, a tall, powerful looking man, then appeared, holding a second portable trow device he had used to trow Taylor, and himself, to the room. He was dressed in arctic clothing: hard-shell pants, boots, and a plasztik parka.

The room let out a collective sigh of relief as Abaddon walked to the door, opened it with a flourish, and exited. Aldrich Taylor collapsed onto the floor.



The Luponi concert scheduled for the Sebring Arena would be Robert's first. Ben had loved *Space Framing* since being introduced to it by his sister, Brynn, and now could not wait to share it with Robert. The concert was to begin at 8:30, and Ben had made reservations at Francesco's, an Italian restaurant just outside the new city of Sebring, constructed on built-up land just northwest of Lake Okeechobee and north of where had been located the old city of Sebring. It was now the southernmost city on mainland Florida.

Florida had been hit hard by global warming and its resultant flooding. Miami and Miami Beach, Naples, and most of South Florida were under water, which caused, in the previous century, the mass migration northward of over six million people searching for dry land. Although a fair amount of Big Pine Key, Ben's home, was above the rising ocean waters, much of the Florida Keys were now floating communities, fashioned after the first successful floating city project built in French Polynesia back in 2030. Key West became the largest, and most successful floating city on Earth, and was enlarged to five miles by ten miles, a 500% increase over its original area. By 2100 the funky tourist mecca had a permanent resident population of 75,000...and growing.

The adaptable Sebring Arena was the cultural heart of Sebring. With a population of 1.5 million, the city found its niche hosting theatre, opera, sporting events, and music concerts there. It was one of Luponi's favorite venues to play.

A classical music composer came up with *Space Framing* when he heard some of his compositions played during a trow to Elon's Space Diner, 18 years earlier. The music was what the composer, Daniel Luponi, surmised music might sound like in space; it was first embraced by young people, then continued to gain in popularity until it became one of the most popular music genres in the universe. The music had a calming effect on most who heard it. Critics who felt it was nothing new dubbed the music, 'New Age music for an arcane age.' But two billion fans around the world felt otherwise.

Ben had the entire evening planned. He and Robert were each to trow to *Francesco's* from work, continue to the arena for the concert, then trow back to their home on Big Pine Key to continue their romantic evening. Ben had looked forward to their regular "husbands' date" all week.

Ben stepped out of the trow pod, one of 238 located in Sebring, at 6:40 PM. He entered the restaurant and approached the host DH.

“Good evening. I’m looking for Robert Connor. Has he arrived?”

This particular DH was dressed in blue gingham. “I’m sorry, Mr. Barnett, but Mr. Connor has not yet arrived. If you would like to take your table, Mr. Connor will be shown to his seat when he arrives.”

A holographic image of a human then appeared to lead Ben to a table in the cucina, or kitchen. The restaurant was patterned after a small palazzo in Cingoli, Italy. The original palazzo had been the family home of Pope Pius VIII, and each room of the restaurant mirrored rooms in the palazzo. The exposed stone walls in the cucina were covered with ancient ‘utensili da cucina’ and a working fireplace. The soggiorno, or living room, was filled with old books and artwork, ostensibly from the Castiglioni family, who still owned the original palazzo.

A menu appeared before Ben; he ordered a Campari and cranberry juice for himself, and olives ascolana; he wanted them to be waiting for Robert upon his arrival.

The open kitchen allowed patrons to watch as a number of mechanicals, all programmed by chef/owner Ricardo Tucci how to cook the restaurant’s dishes, prepared each dish with the care and deft of a seasoned chef. Each dish came out exactly to Tucci’s specifications, ensuring consistency across each one of the 34 *Francesco’s Italian Palazzos* around the globe.

Fifteen minutes later Ben had finished his drink and ordered another. Before it arrived he asked his persachip to contact Robert.

“I’m sorry, but Robert Connor’s Locale does not respond.”

“That’s damn unusual”, Ben thought. He then said to his persachip, “Please locate Robert Connor.”

After only a few moments the response came. “Robert Connor is not present.”

Ben’s heart beat a bit faster. He had never heard of someone with a persachip being unlocatable. Privacy settings aside, virtually everyone on the planet was locatable. If Robert’s privacy settings would not allow his persachip to relay his exact location, it would at least notify Ben that he was present, somewhere. Ben waited another five minutes then contacted Robert’s office. The office digital assistant answered the call.

“I’m looking for Robert Connor. Can you confirm he was at the office, today?”

“Mr. Barnett, I am able to confirm to you that Mr. Connor was at the office today.”

“What time did he leave?”

“Mr. Connor left his office at 6:53 PM. He traveled via Pod USC 428.”

“Destination?”

“Mr. Connor did not relay his destination. Pod logs are unavailable.”

Ben was worried and confused. Pod logs were records of all pod travel; if it was strange that someone was unlocatable, then pod logs being ‘unavailable’ was unheard of and a cause for alarm. He rose from the table just as the olives ascolana were delivered.

Outside the restaurant Ben again tried to contact Robert, but still there was no response. He didn’t know what to do next. Should he trow home to see if he was there? Should he contact the authorities? How long should he wait for Robert to turn up before doing something?

After waiting another two hours, pacing back and forth, making several attempts at contacting Robert, as restaurant patrons arrived and departed in all types of Skiins, and as he thought about, then decided what to do, Ben entered the trow pod that had brought him there and said, “Pod 419BPK, Big Pine Key, Florida.” The pod confirmed the destination as the doors closed.

A moment later Ben had arrived at the trow pod in his home. He looked around for any sign Robert had been there since he left for work that morning, but he found nothing out of the ordinary. He sat on the sofa and waited for Robert to come home, checking the Presence every few minutes. At 3:30 he fell asleep.

Ben awoke as daylight made its way through the windows and washed over his face.

“Time?”

His persachip responded, “The time is 6:37 AM.”

Ben sat upright on the sofa and rubbed the back of his neck. His black slacks and sport shirt were now wrinkled and disheveled. He rose and walked quickly to the bedroom, but there was no sign that Robert had been there. Again Ben’s heart beat faster and was soon pounding in his chest. He took in a deep breath and stood looking at their bed. He could hear the Gulf Bay waters lapping at the shore, just a few meters from their bedroom.

Ben wanted to call Ayn to see if she had heard from Robert, but he was afraid of upsetting her. He contacted Robert’s office again. The office digital assistant answered the call.

“Thank you for contacting the United States and Countries Office of Geographic Development. To whom would you like to speak?”

“I need Security.”

“Yes, sir.”

Immediately the call was transferred; Shintu Osakawi appeared before Ben. “Geographic Development, Security.”

“This is Benjamin Barnett. I need help locating my husband, Robert Connor. He did not arrive home from work last night.”

“Let me check Mr. Connor’s pod log. When did you last see him?”

As Ben gave the details his heart continued pounding in his chest and he began sweating.

“That’s strange, we can’t access his pod logs. We’ll look into it. We’ll contact you when we locate Mr. Connor.” The call ended.

Ben was angry with the casual tone of the call. He felt more and more anxious about Robert, yet Security was treating the situation as if Robert was simply on vacation.

Ben tried to reach Robert several more times, but still there was no response. He reasoned he needed help with the Presence; he called Noah.

“Noah, I need your help. Robert is missing.”

“Missing. Oh? How so?”

“He missed our dinner date last night and hasn’t been home all night. There’s no sign of him on the Presence. I’m really worried.”

“I’m on my way home, now. Trow right over. Pod OP033. I’m sending you my apartment location.”

“Thanks, Noah.”

Ben entered his trow pod and said, “Pod OP033, Oak Park, Illinois.” The pod confirmed his destination and moments later Ben exited the Pod in Oak Park. He walked south past a community park and playground toward Noah’s apartment building. Noah was just arriving home, carrying a bag of groceries.

Ben approached Noah and tried to take the bag for him, but Noah jerked it away. “That’s okay...I’ve got this.”

When they reached the apartment door, it recognized Noah and opened. “Let me put these away and we’ll find Robert. It’s probably a persachip problem.”

Noah set the bag on his kitchen counter, then reached inside and pulled out two unmarked pill bottles and placed them inside one of the kitchen cabinets.

The apartment was sparsely furnished. One room comprised the living room and kitchen. There was a love seat and small wood chair along one wall. The rest of the room was filled with technology from the past: 100-year-old video games, an ancient and obsolete personal computer from circa 2024 with one of the first holographic displays, and a wearable computer circa 2063. Noah had filled his holo-walls with like images. There were videos of the evolution of robotics, from their first major uses in factory assembly lines to the first home-use robot. They were huge and clunky, unlike more recent, scaled down and efficient models resembling, in some cases, stick figures come to life. Present-day digital humans, however, often resembled human beings to the point that they could be mistaken for one.

Noah motioned for Ben to follow him through a doorway just off the living room. As he opened the door to the room Ben was astonished to see a robust Presence setup that would rival even what Ben had seen at Fereday’s technology facility.

“What is all this?”

“It’s my little corner of the world. From here I can get into any Presence locale, anywhere.”

“I’d say.”

The walls were filled with images, maps, and videos of all manner of people and places. On the floor sat three plasztik computer servers, each 75 centimeters high and equally as wide. A small, single bed was pushed into the corner. There was enough computing power to literally run

the world from the room. In other circumstances Ben might have been alarmed at what Noah was able to do, but in that moment he thought only of Robert.

Noah sat at a black plastic office chair, floating on a Skiin base. It moved to Noah's desired position at the center of his Presence setup with a wave of his hand. "Locate Robert Connor," he said to the array. "Don't worry, we'll know where he is in a few moments," Noah said without looking at Ben.

The response came back identical to that given to Ben the night before. "Robert Connor is not present."

"Not present", said Ben. "How is that possible? Robert's persachip should respond no matter what."

"Okay, okay. It's a little strange, but it's possible. He might have fallen and smashed the persachip, the signal could somehow be blocked...there are a number of reasons his persachip might not respond."

"Yes, but the Presence should pick up that a persachip has gone dead and report that."

Noah called up the parameters display and made some adjustments, then ran the search again. But still the response came back negative. "Robert Connor is not present."

Noah pretended to think a moment, then asked, "Where, exactly was the last place you know Robert was located?"

"He left Crystal City yesterday after work. We were supposed to meet in Sebring for dinner, but he never arrived."

"Okay, okay. Do you know which pod he left from?"

"He always uses the one in the lobby of his office. USC428. His digital assistant confirmed that."

Noah returned his attention to his computer array. "Display pod log, USC428."

"Pod log USC428 unavailable."

Robert looked at Noah. "That's the response I got from his office."

"Let me think a minute." Noah turned his attention to the array once again. He again made parameter adjustments, then said, "Display pod USC428 image Saves from yesterday."

An area of the wall lit up with a display of images of the pod in the lobby of Robert's office building. Display scroll from timestamp..." Noah looked at Ben and raised his eyebrows.

Ben said, "His office said he left work at 6:53 PM"

“6:45 through 7:15 PM.”

Short video Saves began running on the display. It showed people entering and exiting the pod in Washington. At 7:02 PM Robert appeared.

“There he is!”

Noah then said, “Repeat from 7:02 PM, audio to full.”

The video Save showed Robert entering the pod. They then heard him state his destination. “Francesco’s Italian Palazzo, Sebring, Florida.”

Ben did not take any notice of the brief flash of light that washed over Robert as he entered the pod before the doors closed; Noah remained silent; he did not look away from the display for fear of giving himself away.

The pod doors reopened a moment later. Noah froze the video Save display.

Ben stood staring at the empty pod. “Why didn’t he arrive? Where did he go? The destination pod in Sebring...call up that video Save.”

Noah looked at Ben and began to say something, but decided against it. He then spoke to the array. “Display pod listing for Francesco’s Italian Palazzo, Sebring, Florida.”

“236 pods listed for Sebring, Florida. Closest pod for Francesco’s Italian Palazzo is pod SB112.”

“Display video Save for pod SB112, yesterday, 7:00 PM through 7:05 PM.”

They watched several video Saves in that time period; none showed Robert exiting the pod.

Noah periodically glanced Ben’s way to discern if Ben suspected him. The only sound in the room was the low, gentle cracking of electricity running through the computer array.

Ben was silent a moment, then said, “This was a deliberate act.”

Noah stayed facing the display wall; now he dared not look at Ben at all.

“Ben, we don’t know that.”

“This was a deliberate act! Pod logs unavailable? Video Saves unavailable?”

Noah then ordered the Presence to change privacy settings. “All privacy settings set to NS-8, searchable parameters, unfiled.” Noah turned to Ben and said, “This should do it. I’m going to do a worldwide search of persachips.”

“Persachips? You can do that? Persachips are completely private. No one can access a persachip.”

Noah's pride got the best of him. "Watch this." Noah ordered his Presence array to do a persachip search. "Locate Caesar1." Prime Minister Paul Galbraith appeared on the display. He was in his home at 10 Downing Street in London, having a drink with several new Parliament members.

"Is that Paul Galbraith? Noah, they'll put you away for that. How long have you been able to do that?"

Noah switched off the live persachip feed and initiated another search. "If Robert is out there, this search will find him."

Ben stood silent. He rubbed the back of his neck, wondering if he should report Noah or thank him. After a few moments, Noah rose from his chair and said, "This will take a while. Let's get some coffee."

Noah and Ben talked as they walked to the kitchen. "He probably got trown to the wrong place and decided to wait out his trow time limit somewhere overnight."

"But why can't I reach him? He would have contacted me." Out of nervousness Ben began emptying the bag of groceries Noah had placed on the counter.

"Remember that time I couldn't reach you? It was just a Presence glitch. I knew you were okay."

Ben was struck by a thought. "Did you hack into my persachip, then?"

Noah was putting away the items that Ben placed on the counter; he debated in his mind whether to own up to what he had done. He looked at Ben with his head bowed. "I found you, didn't I?"

"That's totally illegal!"

"Yeah, well, you don't seem to have much problem with it, now."

"Look, we'll find Robert and then you'll never do this again."

Noah turned his head slowly to face Ben. "Now you're telling me what to do?"

"No! I just don't want you to get into trouble."

"The same way you felt five years ago when I developed telepatitis?"

"Noah. I warned you about the trowing. You were trowing 6, 7 times a day. What did you think would happen?"

"What was I to do? I had no choice!"



“Noah, life has limits, and you didn’t respect those limits. You had a choice...you just thought you were invincible.”

Noah exploded, “I thought I would lose you!”

Ben stopped. His eyes squinted and he turned a red pepper over and over in his hands. “Why did you think that?”

Noah took a minute before answering.

“Because I wanted to be with you every second of the day...because I knew you didn’t love me.”

Ben was surprised Noah had realized early on that Noah’s feelings for him had not been reciprocated. He softened his language and tried to let him down easy. “You are very important to me, Noah. You know that.”

“Yes, we’re great *friends*.” Noah began to make a pot of coffee. “I wanted...I want...more.” Noah turned to Ben and hugged him close. “We were so good together.”

Ben did not want to upset Noah both because he genuinely liked him, and also because he needed Noah right now.

“I’m sorry, Noah. Our feelings are our feelings – we love who we love.” Ben broke the embrace. “No one can change that.”

Noah opened the cabinet where he had placed the pill bottles. He removed one bottle and shook it in Ben’s face. “This is why you left, isn’t it?”

Ben grabbed the bottle from Noah. “What is this? Is this Ephramin?” He opened the bottle and recognized the pills. “You told me you were off Ephramin!”

“I can’t do it...and you know why!”

“I know?”

“You left when I needed you most. How could I get off Ephramin by myself? You were the reason I got sick in the first place! Then you disappeared.”

“You got sick because you were trowing every day to Japan for your job, to Brooklyn to see your mother, home to Orlando Beach. I tried to warn you about all that trowing!”

“I just wanted to please you.”

“Please me?”

“I knew I wasn’t good enough for Benjamin Barnett. You were out saving the world and I was trying to live up to your expectations.”

“I had no expectations. I only wanted you to be the best you could be...to be happy.”

Noah took Ben’s hand in his. “I was happy when we were together. And we could have that, again.”

Ben cupped Noah’s face in his hand. “I’m sorry, Noah.” He then pulled away and crossed into the living room. There was a long silence, then Ben turned to Noah. “Noah, I love Robert. I’m going to spend the rest of my life with him.” Noah smirked as Ben continued, “But that doesn’t mean I won’t be there for you, too.”

Noah stuffed his feelings deep down and tried to shake off the awkwardness between them. “I’m sure you will.”

“Look, I mean it. I can set up rehab for you...” The Presence array signaled the end of the search and broke their conversation. Ben ran to the array room. Noah stood alone in the living room a few seconds before joining Ben.

When he reached the room they heard, “Robert Connor is not present.”

Ben’s shoulders dropped. “So much for a glitch. I’m going to call Maria Verdugo at State...she might help me.”

Noah responded a bit too quickly. “No! Um, let me try one more thing.”

Again Noah adjusted the search parameters. In only a few moments the array responded. “Robert Connor located.”

Ben was too focused on finding Robert to notice Noah’s timely results. He shouted, “Where?”

Noah asked, “Where is Robert Connor located?”

“Robert Connor is in Room 338, Ward B, Fulton Medical Center, Karbala, Sobhi.”

“Sobhi?” Ben was confused as to how Robert ended up in Sobhi, of all places. “I have to go.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No. You said you can’t trow for another two years.”

“I haven’t trown in over a year...one time won’t hurt.”

“Noah, no.”

“I’m going with you.”

Ben didn’t have time to argue. He went out the apartment door and began running toward the trow pod.

Noah opened the pill bottle, removed five Ephramin pills, and swallowed them. He grabbed his jacket and ran out the door.

The Fulton Medical Center's trow pod was located in the hospital's lobby. The lobby was small and artificially made cheery, with lots of pots of Purple Lisianthus and Pink Roses.

Ben emerged from the trow pod and looked around for directions to Ward B. A holo-directory of the hospital floated on one wall. Ben approached the directory and asked for directions to Ward B. The directory recognized Ben and responded to him in English.

"Ward B. Take the corridor to your left." An arrow appeared to show him the way.

Fulton Hospital had been named for Thierry Fulton, a General in the U.S.C. army; he was the hero of the Sobhi uprising that occurred when the U.S.C. announced it would annex Iraq and rename it Sobhi. The hospital was new and state-of-the-art. Ben felt that if there was anything seriously wrong with Robert, he would be in good hands.

Ben found room 338 on the left side of the corridor; he fairly burst into the room to discover Robert lying in the bed, seemingly asleep. A holo-image of a digital nurse appeared at the foot of the bed.

"Hello, Mr. Barnett."

"What happened? How is Robert?"

"Do you know this man? His persachip has been removed."

Ben looked at Robert. He saw that Robert's left wrist was bandaged where his persachip had been located.

"Ye...yes. His name is Robert Connor. He works for the U.S.C.; he's my husband. How is he? What happened to him?"

"Mr. Barnett, I can have the doctor contact you."

"Yes, please."

"Just one minute, please." The hologram faded.

Ben took Robert's hand. Noah then entered the room and stood by the door. He looked at Robert, then closed his eyes and turned his head away.

Robert opened his eyes and smiled when he recognized Ben. He squeezed Ben's hand.

"Robert, what happened? Are you okay?"

"I...I'm not certain."

"Did someone jump you? Did they take your persachip?"

“What?” Robert was only half-awake. He was on high doses of morphine and had been given a sleep aid. “I don’t...remember.” He was very pale and there were large, dark circles under his eyes. His hand squeeze was very weak. He periodically winced in pain.

A short man in a white medical coat entered the room and approached the bed. “I’m Doctor O’Halloran,” he said. “I’ve just received Mr. Connor’s personal data. You are his husband?”

“Yes, Ben Barnett. What happened?”

Dr. O’Halloran did not answer Ben’s question.

“Mr. Connor is resting comfortably, as you can see.” He turned his attention to Robert. “Can we get you anything, Mr. Connor?”

Robert weakly nodded his head ‘no’.

Dr. O’Halloran turned back to Ben and said, “When you are ready, we can talk in my office. Room 124.” He then returned his attention to Robert. “You need anything, just raise your hand or ask for it. The digital nurse will take care of it.”

The Doctor turned to leave. He touched Ben’s shoulder and said, “When you’re ready.” He then left the room. A shiver went up Ben’s spine.

Ben turned his attention to Robert. “Robert, what happened? Don’t you remember anything?”

Robert did not reply.

“I want to get you closer to home. I’ll ask the doctor when you can trow.” Ben bent down and kissed Robert on his forehead. “I’m going to see the doctor, then I’ll be right back.” Ben motioned to Noah for him to approach the bed. “Robert, this is Noah. He’ll stay here while I speak with the doctor. I’ll be right back, I promise.”

Ben broke his handhold on Robert and left the room. In two minutes he was in Dr. O’Halloran’s office. He was too nervous to sit. The doctor sat in his high-back chair behind a beige metal desk in front of a large window looking out over the University of Karbala.

“Doctor, what happened?”

“As far as we can tell, Mr. Connor was trown numerous times, perhaps as many as 14, in a very short timeframe.”

“How short a time?”

“Perhaps only 30 minutes.”

Ben stopped pacing and thought about that. “30 minutes! How is that even possible? Look, I work for Fereday and our trow pods would not allow something like that to occur.”

“I can only tell you that he shows all the signs of advanced telepatitis due to trowing.”

“What are you doing for him?”

The doctor’s lips were pressed, his sympathetic eyes signaling his loss how to say anything that might be of comfort. “Mr. Connor, there is nothing we can do. The damage to his internal organs is too extensive.”

“But people get over telepatitis all the time.” Ben’s eyes were wild; they looked at the doctor, then out the window, then around the room. He was unable to focus.

“Mr. Connor, sit down.” Ben sat in one of two metal and plaztik chairs in front of the desk.

“I’ve never had a case where this many trows was involved. It is not something from which a body can recover.”

“There’s Ephramin...surgery, you can repair the internal damage.”

“If there were *anything* we could do...”

Ben stared at the doctor. He put his head in his hands. After a few moments he looked up. “I have to get him out of here. I have to get him to the Mayo Trow Facility.”

“Mr. Barnett, Mr. Connor cannot trow again...ever. It will kill him.”

Ben stood and pounded on the desk as he rose. “Then you HAVE to do something to help him.”

“We are keeping him comfortable. I’m afraid that is the extent of what can be done.”

Ben put the back of his hand to his mouth and rubbed it. He felt a sense of powerlessness he never had before. He walked back and forth in the room several times, desperately trying to come up with a solution. He could not accept that Robert would not recover. He told himself that if anyone could save Robert, it was him. Dr. O’Halloran waited patiently. Finally, Ben turned to leave the room, stopped halfway, then turned back to the doctor. “How long?”

The doctor quietly responded, “You should say to him what you need to say.”

The realization hit Ben that the doctor was talking about mere hours. As he left the office he said, “Why am I wasting my time here.”

Ben quickly returned to Robert’s room. Noah was scrolling through Robert’s medical chart.

“What are you doing?” Ben asked.

Noah stopped what he was doing and stepped away from the holo-chart. "I'm trying to see what they're doing for him," he then left the room.

Ben approached Robert's side. He again took his hand. He placed his other hand on Robert's forehead. Robert opened his eyes and said, "You're here."

"Yes, of course I am. I'll always be here."

"Yes, that's what you promised. I remember."

Ben brushed back Robert's hair with his hand. "I'll never leave you...you know that."

Outside Robert's room, Noah paced back and forth, feeling both vengeance and remorse at the same time. It was true, he still loved Ben, but he had seen how Ben reacted when he saw Robert in his hospital bed, near death. As much as he wanted to feel that same devotion from Ben, he began to accept that no one had control over their feelings...not him...not Robert...not Ben. If it couldn't be him Ben was devoted to, he was glad Ben had someone to love. He paced the hallway, pounding his fist into his hand, regretting his past actions, and their results.

For the next seven hours Ben stood in the same position by Robert's bed, holding his hand and occasionally brushing his other hand along Robert's temples. He tried to get Robert to drink some water, but he couldn't swallow. Ben used a wet towel to dab Robert's lips. The morphine was automatically administered via an IV drip. In the middle of the night, Robert woke.

"There you are. I was just dreaming of you."

"Really? What was I doing?"

"Eating gelato in a piazza in Italy. Do you remember? Did that really happen?"

"Yes, it really happened. You had chocolate chip. Remember?"

"Let's go there again."

"We will, my love. I promise we will."

Robert fell unconscious again.

Three hours later, still holding Robert's hand, Ben began to feel overwhelmed. As he gently cried, Robert's eyes opened. He reached up and placed his hand on Ben's cheek. "What's wrong?" Robert said, rubbing Ben's cheek. He closed his eyes again. He took in a deep breath, then slowly released it. He did not breath again.

The digital nurse appeared at the foot of the bed, noted Robert's status, then faded away.

Ben stood next to the bed another half-hour, holding Robert's hand, trying desperately to will another breath out of him. Then he slowly lowered his head to Robert's chest, lay alongside

him in the bed, pulled Robert's body close to his, and hugged him tight. He could detect a faint aroma of Robert's cologne lingering in the air.



Ben's home had always felt like a sanctuary to him; it was where he could get away from the world, from his responsibilities, his duties, and feel safe, especially after Robert moved in. But now it felt empty, lonely, and sad. All Robert's belongings were there: his clothes, still arranged in the wardrobe according to type and color; his favorite sweater, neatly hanging on his clothes butler; the jewelry box Ben had given him and that contained his cufflinks, sitting alone on their dresser. Robert's wedding ring sat atop the box, as if Robert would soon emerge from the bathroom, freshly showered, to slip the ring back on his finger. A towel lay on the floor, Robert's clothes butler was overturned, a window shade had been yanked off its mechanism. Ben thought Robert would be 'miffed' at the disorganization.

Ben was strewn across the bed. Their bed. Only now it was, once again, Ben's bed. He peered out the window and watched a gentle breeze flutter the needles on an old pine tree. Dade County Pine – that's the wood everyone coveted in the Keys because of its hardness and resistance to termites. Except now the wood was very rare; most Dade County Pine trees had gone under water with the rest of South Florida. The few trees left were protected from removal; one could not even trim one without local approval by a certified arborist. Why did his thoughts go to trees?

Ben had lain in bed for three days. He thought of Robert, then about nonsensical things. What must life have been like before trowing? Why did man so desperately wish to colonize the moon? Mars? He wondered why pointless questions entered his brain. He would nod off for an hour or two, then awaken to Key Deer passing by his window, or birds fluttering in the trees and making nests for their hatchlings. A Peregrine Falcon sat majestically on the top branch of a pine tree, proudly throwing his chest out. Ben would then nod off again.

Ben barely remembered being brought home by Noah, who'd stayed with him since Sobhi. He took care of arrangements when Ben could not. He had contacted Ben's father, his sister, and even had contacted Robert's sister, Ayn. He'd slept on the sofa.

Noah was on the Presence when Ben walked into the living room. He waited for Ben to speak first.

"You're still here."

"Thought you might need me."

"Yeah... what I need." Ben was still in the same clothes he had worn that day at the hospital. He held the hope that as long as he didn't allow anything to change, nothing would change. Robert

would come into the room and berate him for not showering or hanging up his clothes. He thought about making Olives Ascolona for Robert.

Noah rose from the chair he was seated in and started for the kitchen. “How about something to eat?” He began cracking eggs to make an omelet. Sitting on the dining room table was an urn.

Ben’s face was pale. He moved to the sofa, making certain he did not look toward the dining room table, and plopped into it; he buried his head in his hands and slouched over the coffee table. There was a bit of wind outside; it rustled through the mangroves just offshore.

“Two eggs or three?”

Ben didn’t respond.

“You have to eat something.” Noah didn’t know what to say. “Robert would want you to eat something.”

“How do *you* know what Robert would want? I didn’t even know what Robert wanted.” Ben turned his head toward a wall display and caught a glimpse of a photo of Robert sitting at his desk in his office in Crystal City. He ordered the wall display to shut down; the wall went dark.

“I didn’t live up to my promise. Robert would still be here if I’d lived up to my promise.”

“Ben, come on...you did nothing wrong.”

Ben only repeated, “I didn’t live up to my promise.”

Noah could not get Ben to eat anything.

“You can go home, now. I’ll be okay.”

I’m not leaving until you eat something.”

Ben grabbed the plate with the cheese omelet and choked it down his throat in two bites.

“You can go home now.”

Noah sat next to Ben and put his arm around him. He then began to rub Ben’s back. Ben was repulsed.

“Please! Just go home!”

Noah got up from the sofa. “I’ll come by tomorrow to see how you’re doing.”

“You aren’t supposed to trow, remember? I don’t want to be responsible for your death, too.”

“Then let me stay and take care of you.”

“I’m supposed to be the one taking care of people. I take care of my mother, I take care of my father, and I was supposed to be taking care of Robert!”

“You can’t save the entire world, Ben.”

Ben looked up at Noah with tears in his eyes. “Why couldn’t I see it? It was right there in front of me. Maria Verdugo tried to make me see it, Andrew Montgomery tried to make me see it, goddammit, even the guys working on the City of Atlantis wanted me to do something. But I didn’t. I’m too busy, I said. I’ve got too many irons in the fire. Robert’s dead because I wouldn’t see what I was supposed to do.”

Noah looked at the photo of Robert, then said, “That’s not why he died.”

Ben didn’t hear Noah. He only said, “What am I going to do?”

Ben’s persachip displayed before him a calendar reminder. Ben read the appointment he had set 11 months earlier: ‘August 24: Visit Moon City with Robert.’

Noah sat on the sofa again and this time Ben melted into his arms and sobbed.

Ben finally managed to sleep through most of the night. He awoke at 8:00, showered, and ate the breakfast Noah had prepared for him before going for his morning run. After eating, Ben sat on the sofa and switched on his display wall. "Display video Saves, Robert Connor." The display began playing Saves of Robert: at Ayn's house with her and her family, riding his Skiin, asleep one night when he didn't know Ben was recording him. There were photos of the two of them hiking Napa Valley with a group of a dozen other hikers. Robert had been jealous of Ben's new friendship with one of the hikers. Ben laughed out loud at the ridiculous thought that anyone could take him away from Robert. He smiled for a moment. Then he remembered that he *had* been taken away from Robert. He became angry. He swiped his hand down violently; the wall display shut down.

Ben sat in silence for a while. He never felt more lost in his life. He thought about all the promises he had made in his life; he thought he had broken pretty much all of them. His promise to his mother to be a doctor, his promise to Special Forces, his promise to the State Department and his country. He couldn't bear another broken promise; he couldn't bear to let Robert down. Especially Robert. But he didn't know how he could possibly keep his promise to Robert.

"Contact Cheryl Norberg, Fereday Space, Mexico City." A moment later Cheryl's hologram appeared in the room.

"Finally! Ben, my God, I'm so sorry."

"I have one question: How did our trow pods allow Robert to be trown more than a dozen times in less than an hour? That is supposed to be impossible."

Norberg responded, "It *is* impossible. It could not have been the trow pods."

"Come on, Cheryl...what else could it have been? You think someone waved a magic wand? Robert died of acute telepatitis brought on by trowing. Don't try to protect Fereday." Ben was surprised at his anger with Norberg, with whom he had always had an excellent working relationship.

Norberg did not say anything and Ben didn't comprehend her silence as meaning anything more than being at a loss for words. He felt very uncomfortable about the events surrounding Robert's death; something was nagging him at the back of his mind, but he couldn't bring it to the front. His grief was still clouding his thoughts. The image of a magic wand kept dancing around his head.

“I was really calling to say ‘I quit’.” Ben swiped his hand down and the call ended. He felt bad that he had lost control of his emotions and had spoken to Norberg as he had. He slammed his fist down on the arm of the sofa, nearly fracturing his hand. He reeled from the pain and rubbed it with his other hand. He wondered why his whole life felt like a series of lost opportunities. When was he going to take control?

He continued going through more Saves of himself and Robert during their short time together and came across a video Save of them swimming in the Adriatic Sea, during their honeymoon in Sirolo. They were goofing around like a couple of teenagers. Robert pushed Ben’s head below the water. Robert broke free and retaliated by doing the same to Ben. He held Ben below the surface a moment too long; Ben convulsed as he took water into his lungs. Robert pulled Ben up out of the water as he choked and spit water and gasped for air.

“Jesus, I’m sorry!”

Ben continued to recover a few minutes. Soon he was fine. Robert gave Ben a big hug and apologized again. “Baby, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. We were just playing.”

“Yes, but you could have drowned.”

“And *then* what would you do?”

Robert was deadly serious. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“Aww, you’d miss me?”

Robert pulled Ben close. “I better not ever find out.”

“What would you do if I drowned.”

“I would move heaven and earth to make certain no one ever would drown again and have to go through losing someone like you.”

“That’s ridiculous...how would you prevent anyone from ever drowning?”

“I don’t know, but I’d do it.”

Ben looked into Robert’s serious blue eyes. “I believe you would.” He kissed Robert, then said, “I’ll never let you go.”

“Promise?”

Ben combed his fingers through Robert’s hair. “Promise.”

Ben froze the video. He stared at the two of them standing thigh deep in the Adriatic, holding each other. He said softly to himself, “I promise.”

Ben had been sitting next to his mother in the third floor community room of the assisted living facility for almost two hours. Sherry wore a blue-green drape dress and yellow house slippers. Ben just wanted to sit with her in silence for a while. He held her hand as the two of them stared out the window. A sailboat moved slowly toward Mallory Docks and out to Sunset Key. Across the room an elderly woman, dressed like she had tickets to Cinderella's Ball, sat alone in a wheelchair, sleeping. Another woman stood at a window, hugging a baby doll while a man sat slouched in his chair, asleep.

Sherry turned her head and looked at Ben. "Hello."

"Hi, Mom."

"Do I know you?"

"I'm your son, Benjamin." Ben thought how through the years his mother had been less and less certain who he was.

"It's nice to see you. Can I call you Ben?"

It was a bit of a tonic to hear her speak again. Ben kissed her hand and put it to his cheek.

"Oh! My! Aren't you affectionate."

"How are you feeling, today, Mom?"

She looked out the window and said, "It's a lovely day." She then turned again to Ben and stared at him a few moments. "Oh, dear, why are you so sad on such a lovely day?" A puzzled look washed over her face, and Ben's. Her eyes, usually looking off into the distance, focused on him. She sat upright. "Ben, what's wrong."

He remained silent.

"Tell me, honey. What's the matter?"

Ben spoke more to himself than to his mother. "I made a promise and let him down and now he's gone and there's nothing I can do."

"Where did he go?" Ben only looked out the window. "Ah, I see."

Sherry placed her hand under Ben's chin and pulled him to face her. "Benjamin Barnett, you never let anyone down in all your life."

Ben was astonished to hear his mother speaking, apparently, coherently. He turned to face her and searched her face for a verifiable sign of recognition.

Sherry spoke again. "You keep that promise."

Ben looked into Sherry's eyes and for the first time in a long time, saw that she was present.

"It's too late," he said, and began sobbing. "Robert's gone and it's too late. There's nothing I can do."

Sherry frowned. "When someone leaves us it doesn't mean we stop caring...or doing. We care long after they leave us. It's the greatest way we show them we love them. We love...we care...we do...and we keep our promises. That is what we do. That is what you will do. That is what you have always done." Sherry reached up and gently stroked Ben's cheek.

Ben sat perfectly still, staring at his mother; he was dumbfounded. He couldn't speak a word. Sherry ran her hand over Ben's hair, stroking his head. They sat in silence. The sun shone in through the window and made a window pane pattern on the floor.

After a few minutes Ben's father, Zachary, came to retrieve his wife. "Ben. What are you doing here?"

"Just wanted to see you and...I've been talking with Mom."

Zachary looked at his wife, smiled, then said, "Have you?" He kissed Sherry on the forehead, then turned to Ben. "I didn't expect to see you for a while. You need to take some time for yourself."

"I've been taking time for myself...too much time."

Zachary said, "We loved Robert. Tell me what I can do."

"There's nothing you need to do. Thanks, Dad."

Ben looked at his parents, still together, still caring, still doing. For 24 years his father had been there for his mother. She left him long ago, but he was still there for her.

Ben rose, hugged his father and kissed him on his cheek. "But there is something I can do." He kissed his mother, said, "I love you, Mom"; she did not respond. He said, "Bye, Dad." He went out the door and quickly walked down the hall toward the elevator. He waved his hand in front of the 'down' sensor and impatiently tapped his foot.

He said to his persachip, "Call Cheryl Norberg."

Norberg appeared in front of him. "Hi Ben. I was hoping I'd hear from you. Where are we?"

"Is the deal still on to hold my job while I take care of some things?"

"You know it is."

"Okay. I'll be in touch. And Cheryl...thanks."

“Whatever you need, Ben.”

In the elevator Ben called Maria Verdugo at the State Department. Ben was walking out the door of the building when he was connected with Verdugo, who was in Tokyo.

“Madam Secretary, I have some ideas about what to do about these disappearances. Can we meet?”

“I’ll be in my office in four hours.”

“I’ll see you then.”

“Are you coming back to help us?”

“I’m keeping my promises. I’ll see you soon.”



“I don’t know exactly how, yet, but John Abaddon is definitely a part of all this.” Ben was in no mood to play the diplomat any longer. “I intend to find out exactly what that is.”

Cheryl Norberg looked around the meeting room, then turned her attention to Ben. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves...we don’t know for certain who is behind these murders.”

Ben snapped his head towards Norberg. “I’m heading up this investigation for the State Department, not Fereday. We’re going to stop those responsible for this chaos before they kill again.” Ben paused a moment, took a deep breath, and rubbed the back of his neck. He softened his rhetoric. “Cheryl, we’ve got to make certain these people don’t harm anyone else.”

After speaking with Maria Verdugo and accepting his mission, Ben had trown to a meeting with Norberg and other Fereday executives. The small meeting room at Fereday Space headquarters in Mexico City could accommodate a dozen people; today, it was underutilized with only four in attendance: Ben, Cheryl Norberg, and two Fereday executives who headed up the portable trow pod project: Rhonda Rhodes and Danitra French. French said, “Well, whatever help we can offer, we’re glad to give it.”

Rhodes agreed. “Absolutely. Just tell us what you need.”

“What we need is to figure out how they are pulling off these disappearances. If it’s not the pods, then what is it?”

Norberg remained silent, biting her lip. Rhodes and French looked to Norberg.

Ben noticed the tension in the room. “What?” He looked to all three executives. “What do you know? I have the highest security clearance; you can tell me.”

Still they sat in silence.

“What’s going on?”

Norberg took a deep breath, then let it out: “We know how they’re doing it...Ben, they have our portable trow devices.”

“They what? Who’s *they*?” Ben thought of the implications of what Norberg said. Suddenly everything made sense: the disappearances of people obviously trown yet there were no trow pod logs explaining their trows, finding bodies in locations where there were no trow pods, the fact that Robert was trown multiple times in only a few minutes. Ben could see it all happen with portable, site-to-site trow devices. The image of the magic wand swirled in his head. He was apoplectic. His eyes widened; his nostrils flared. “Cheryl, you told me the portable trow devices

were locked up and safe. You *told* me testing had proven them a failure and that it would take more time to develop them. Isn't that what you told me?"

Norberg did not respond.

"ISN'T IT?!"

"I'm sorry, Ben, but we were instructed by the Department of Justice not to disclose the theft of two of our prototypes. We still don't know how they got hold..."

"You were instructed...*instructed!*?" Ben tried to speak, but could not. He paced the front of the room for a few moments, allowing the significance of it all to sink in. He swung around to face Norberg. "Robert was murdered with one of those prototypes...you were *instructed!*?"

Norberg rose and approached Ben. "I'm sorry Ben, but our hands were tied. If we'd known what would happen we never would have..."

"Why the hell were the portable trow devices put on the shelf in the first place? Because you *knew* how they might be used, that's why. So don't feed me your 'if we had only known' bullshit!" Ben raked his hand through his hair, then grabbed onto a shock of it; he wanted to rip it out of his head. He looked directly at Norberg and pointed his finger. "You knew." Ben slammed his fist into the wall.

Norberg said, "I think we need to take a break. Ben, we need to talk."

She motioned for Ben to join her in the hallway. She approached the holo-door, which 'opened' for them. Ben stared into space, rubbed the back of his neck, then moved to the open doorway and out into the hallway and continued pacing. Norberg followed and the door reappeared behind them.

"Ben, you gotta' believe we thought we were doing what was best. The State Department and DOJ felt that if the knowledge that the portable trow devices theft had gotten out it could've caused widespread panic and emboldened those responsible."

"Not exactly great for Fereday's bottom line, huh?"

"That's not fair. We were only following orders. They threatened us with patent forfeiture."

"And you couldn't have that, could you?"

"I swear, Ben, we thought they'd catch whoever is doing this and the portable devices would be returned to us."

“Didn’t exactly work out in our favor, did it? What’s to keep them from reverse-engineering those prototypes? For all we know they might now have hundreds of the devices. That’s some serious carnage they could wreak...hell, they already have!”

“That’s why you’re here, today. We believe we can offer you the kind of help that will stop them.”

“What kind of help?”

“Come on back into the meeting and we’ll show you.” Norberg stepped in front of Ben and looked him in the eyes. “We can get these people.”

Ben noticed someone approaching from down the hall. He turned to see it was Noah. “I’ll be there in a moment.”

Norberg returned to the meeting room as Noah approached Ben. “Noah, how did you know where I was...how did you get in here?”

Noah pursed his lips, cocked his head, and looked at Ben with raised eyebrows.

Ben thought to himself, “Of course, he hacked my persachip.” He said to Noah, “Never mind. What are you doing here?”

“I want to help.”

“That’s great. I’m going to need it.”

“And I need to tell you something. You’re not going to like it. But I’ll make it up to you.”

Ben felt anxious and hurried. “Noah, I know you hacked into my persachip. It’s okay...you had good intentions...don’t worry about it.”

“No, Ben, I need to tell you about Robert.”

“Robert?” Ben froze and searched Noah’s face for clues. “What about him?”

Noah had every intention of telling Ben about his involvement with John Abaddon and how he helped Abaddon track Robert. He knew that Ben would hate him the rest of his life, if not actually kill him.

“I hacked into Robert’s persachip, too.”

“It’s okay, Noah, I’m glad you did. I just wish you had done it earlier, then Robert might still be here.”

Having seen how Ben was affected by Robert’s death, Noah had been feeling regret on a scale he never had before. He wanted to set things right. But maybe this wasn’t the right time. He

could at least try to make amends, as if that silly little word could contain all it would take to make Ben forgive what he'd done.

“Ben, let me be part of the investigation. I know I can help.”

“Answer me this. If you had to, do you think you could hack into Fereday's Presence?”

“I guarantee it.”

“Okay, come on.”

Ben and Noah entered the meeting room. Noah stood by the door; Ben retook his place at the front of the room. “This is Noah Asher. He's part of the investigative team. Cheryl, you said you could tell us about the devices you lost.”

“It's true, we lost two prototypes of the new portable trow devices. The official word was that they didn't function properly and that is why we put the project on hold. The truth is they functioned all too well. You're right, Ben, we locked them up because we feared exactly this kind of situation. The possibility of trowing world leaders was – is, as we have seen - an existential threat; we had to put the brakes on the project until we figured out what to do.”

Ben struggled to keep from exploding. “We need to know what these devices are capable of.”

“Here is one of the prototypes.” A hologram of one of the devices floated above the table. Ben immediately recognized it.

“I've seen that. Someone pointed one at me, but it didn't do anything. I thought it was some sort of old-fashioned gun like everyone in America used to own.”

All three Fereday execs perked up. Norberg spoke first. “When did this happen? What happened to the trow device?”

Ben thought back to the incident in Hyde Park. “The man who tried to use it on me was picked up by two men in police garb. We later found out they were not police officers. Four men were arrested for kidnappings around the world...Prime Minister Galbraith declared the case solved. But, of course, we learned that wasn't true.”

Ben wondered again about the questions he had had at the Hyde Park Police Station. Perhaps the kidnapping had appeared so amateurish because they had tried to use the portable trow device on Phillip Carico, but it had malfunctioned as it had when tried on Ben, so they attempted to physically kidnap him. But the question remained, why kidnap such specific, yet disparate groups of people?

Norberg asked, "Where did this take place?"

"Hyde Park...London."

"London. With a portable trow device they could secretly trow to anywhere in the world."

"But can they risk trowing just anywhere with only two trows per day?", Ben said. "And what about other objects at the destination site? You don't want to trow inside a mountain, or inside a wall."

"The portable trow devices have been programmed to trow to empty space. They identify solid matter and will adjust the trow destination accordingly, if possible. If the device is not certain the trow will be safe, it will not execute the trow. As for trow limitations, these devices have been significantly upgraded. We estimate the maximum safe number of trows per day to be six to eight, perhaps even more, with a little under two minutes between trows."

"Six to eight? That means they could be in several different locations in a single day. Makes for the possibility to do significant damage. And we have no way to find them."

Rhonda Rhodes explained the implications. "That was our problem. And that's why we had to find a way to know where the portable devices were trowing. So we instituted automatic logging of all trows, like the pods. All trows would be logged into a central database on the Presence."

Norberg continued. "But, of course, we knew that someone would come up with a way to hack into them to disable the logging algorithm. That's one reason we put them on the shelf. We needed to find a better solution."

Ben was feeling frustrated. "So now someone has these devices, which gives them a huge advantage over us. They know where they're trowing, we don't."

"Actually, that's where their advantage ends," said French. "We've discovered a trow 'signature' left behind by the devices."

"A signature. What does that mean?"

Rhonda Rhodes picked up the explanation. "During testing we discovered that when the portable devices complete a trow, they leave a small amount of data behind on the quantum wave. It exists for up to ten seconds before it dissipates. We found a way to capture that data, which allows us to determine the destination of the trow. Then we worked to program the devices to capture that signature."

French continued. “So our problem of losing someone being trown by a portable device is solved because now we can track them. And we can even reverse-trow and bring them back, as long as they remain within one meter of the destination.”

Ben thought about the implications of this new knowledge. “So that puts us on an even playing field.”

“Actually”, said Norberg, “that gives *us* the advantage.”

“How’s that?”

“These signature-tracking devices are our second-generation prototypes. The stolen devices are first-generation. They don’t have tracking capability.”

“So whoever is using these older prototypes thinks they cannot be located after they make a trow?”

“That’s exactly right”, continued Norberg. “They believe that once they trow, we can’t recover them. But now we can bring them back. We set our device to ‘track trow, or ‘retrieve trow’, the device captures the last trow signature, then we can follow them to wherever they trow, or we can retrieve who, or what, was trown.”

“Why aren’t we using these devices?”

“Because”, French explained, “we’ve only just perfected the technology.”

Norberg continued, “But now we have the second-generation devices ready and we’re giving the DOJ 40 of them tomorrow.”

“I’ll need one, as well.” Ben felt encouraged; with a tracking trow device he might have the advantage.

“I already put one aside with your name on it”, said Norberg. “So you see, Ben, we have been working very hard on finding these people and stopping them.”

Noah received a call. His persachip expressed to him, “John Abaddon calling.”

Noah said to his persachip, “Reject call,” even though he knew it was not a good idea to reject a call from Abaddon. He then said to Ben, “Look, I have to go. Can we talk, later? I’ll call you.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later. And Noah...thanks.”

Noah could not look at Ben. He turned quickly to leave the room, then paused. He thought a moment, then turned back to Ben and softly and deliberately said, “Remember Italy.” He turned

again and left the room, heading toward a trow pod. Ben watched him leave, wondering what he could have meant by “remember Italy”. He then returned his attention to the Fereday execs.

“One thought. Are the portable devices also able to track pod trows?”

French said, “The traditional trow pods leave behind a slightly different signature; we haven’t been able to incorporate tracking of pod trows, yet, but we’re working on it.”

“So until you do we must rely on pod logging,” said Ben, almost to himself. Ben placed his hands on the table, propping himself up on it. He looked at Cheryl Norberg. “You know, this technology makes for a very dangerous weapon.”

Norberg said, “Par for the course...when has any new technology in the history of mankind *not* been weaponized?”

“Yes, but with these portable trow pods, a lone tyrant can become an army of one.”

“Then we better stop this tyrant before he achieves that.”

“Oh, we’ll stop them. I promise.”

Noah walked up to the front door to his apartment, which would normally recognize him and automatically open. But this time was different. He stood in a light drizzle of rain for several seconds, trying to get the door to recognize him. He wiped the door's sensor, thinking that perhaps there was something blocking it from detecting him. Still the door did not open. He was about to access the door through his persachip when it finally opened.

The door closed behind him as he entered his apartment. He stopped dead when he noticed a holographic aura flickering in his Presence Array room. He entered the room to see John Abaddon in hologram form, studying the array's displays. Abaddon turned to face Noah.

"Ah. Noah. Here you are."

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought it was time to pay you a little visit and find out exactly what you have been up to these past few weeks."

"No – nothing," Noah nervously replied. "Just tying up some loose ends."

"So I gather. How is our friend Benjamin Barnett doing?"

Noah could hear the rain hitting the roof and gently making its way to the building's gutters. Oak Park was not an environmentally controlled, domed city. The Chicago Dome ended on what used to be South Austin Boulevard, just a few quadrants from Noah's apartment building. Fifteen years earlier the Oak Park City Council opted to remain "environmentally green" and rejected extending the Chicago Dome over their town, hence, the rain.

"We can leave Ben out of this."

"Oh, but can we? Mr. Barnett could be very dangerous to our plans."

"Mr. Abaddon, I've been wanting to speak with you."

"Noah...you're quite nervous. Can I get you something?"

"No...I'm fine. I think that for the first time in a long time, I know what I need to do...what I *should* do."

"And what might that be?" Abaddon did not move. He already knew what Noah was about to say, and he already knew what he, himself, had to do.

Noah retreated to the opposite side of the room. "I appreciate all you've done for me, Mr. Abaddon, but I don't feel I can continue working for Colony Dominion."

"You want out?" Abaddon continued poring through the Presence Array data.



“This is not what I signed up for...I was wrong to...I feel like a traitor to my country...and my friend.”

“You think you can just walk away after what you’ve done?”

“What have I done? Just provided you with some information. I couldn’t know how you would use it.”

“That information led to the death of Robert Connor, and several others. I don’t think your government, or Benjamin Barnett, will look upon your work with us as merely ‘providing information’.”

“No matter the outcome, I’m going to come clean with Ben.”

“You know how that will turn out.”

“I had no idea how the information I provided Colony Dominion would be used. Ben will see that.”

“Benjamin Barnett will see only that you played a major role in murdering Mr. Connor, someone who was quite important to him. How do you think he will feel about that?”

“I won’t do anything, or say anything about Colony Dominion, but I think you will agree I’ve done my part.”

“And then some.”

Noah looked to Abaddon for a reaction, but there was none; Abaddon stood calmly staring at Noah.

Noah said, “Then you understand?”

“I understand completely.” Abaddon approached Noah. “And let me assure you, you have nothing in your future to worry about.”

Noah heard what he wanted to hear from that statement and felt relieved. Abaddon added, “Don’t give it another thought.”

Abaddon ended the call. Just as his holographic image faded, one of Abaddon’s operatives appeared in Noah’s living room, holding a portable trow device. He moved to the Presence Array room and quickly pinned Noah against a wall. He thrust a hypo into Noah’s neck, which injected him with liquid Ephramin, an illegal and undetectable form of the drug. He released Noah, who slapped his hand on the injection site. In a few seconds he felt woozy, fell to his knees, then collapsed to the floor, writhing in pain.

The operative retrieved Noah's Ephramin pills from the kitchen. He opened the bottle and poured the pills over and around Noah's head. He then slipped out of the apartment.

Noah lay semi-conscious for a few moments, then propped himself up on one elbow. His vision was blurred and his heart was racing; he felt as if he would pass out any moment. He forced himself to concentrate and said to his persachip, "display all information on Colony Dominion." Appearing on every available square centimeter of the walls and ceiling were displayed photos of people who had disappeared in the last year, GPS coordinates and maps of trow pod locations around the globe, vids of targeted individuals with their families or at their work place, target lists. A scrolling display of photos included one of Robert, lying unconscious on the banks of the Little Zab River in Sobhi.

Noah said, "Call Ben Barnett."

Ben was about to test the portable trow device Norberg had provided him when Noah's call came through. "Noah, I was just going to..."

Noah broke in, "Ben, I'm sorry about Robert. I didn't know...please forgive me."

"Didn't know what?" Ben's heart raced with fear of what he had been feeling in his gut about Noah all along, but which he had kept stuffed deep down inside. "Noah, where are you?" There was no response from Noah. He told his persachip to "locate Noah Seven Asher". The persachip responded that Noah was in his apartment. "Noah...Noah! I'll be there in a moment."

Ben said to Norberg, "This better work." Then he said to the portable trow device, "Self-trow to Oak Park, Illinois. Execute." Ben and the trow device were enveloped in a blue light, then were transported to the park two blocks from Noah's apartment. Ben made a mental note to be more specific with the portable trow device destination; an exact location or GPS coordinates would be more accurate in the future.

Ben ran the two blocks in the now heavy rain to Noah's apartment. He banged on the door, but there was no response. "Noah!"

He tried to manually open the door, but it would not budge. He looked down at the portable trow device. He thought a moment, then said, "Self trow, one meter West. Execute."

Again Ben was enveloped in the blue trow light and was instantly transported inside Noah's house, materializing in Noah's living room.

"Noah!" He looked around the room for any sign of him. He noticed the flickering lights from the Presence Array and ran to that room to find Noah splayed out on the floor.

“Noah.”

He knelt on the floor and cradled Noah’s upper body in his arms, trying to awaken him by gently patting his face and shaking his arm. “Wake up!” There was no sign of life. Ben noticed that his wrist was emitting a red glow from beneath his skin, where his persachip was located. The red glow, Ben knew, was a confirmation of end of life.

The rain outside was falling heavier and heavier; the sounds of it hitting the roof grew more intense. Ben heard none of it. He sat for a few minutes, still cradling Noah in his arms. Memories of his time with Noah from a few years earlier went through his mind. He then noticed the Ephramin pills on the floor.

The rain on the roof nearly drowned out the gentle laughing from one of the vids displayed on the wall in front of Ben. After a couple of more loops the vid caught his attention. He looked up to see John Abaddon, laughing during a meeting of Colony Dominion. He watched the vid a couple of more loops, then his eyes began to wander, landing on other information around the room. To his left was a ‘target list’ with names he recognized from government, business, prominent people from the arts. To the left of the list were photos of people who had disappeared in the last year, some of whose bodies had never been found and most of whom Ben had not heard about. Above the target list was a Colony Dominion member list; Ben noticed Noah’s name toward the bottom. He began to understand that Noah had left this information for him. He gently laid Noah down on the floor, brushing aside most of the Ephramin pills, then approached each piece of displayed information Noah had left for him and began studying it.

As he went over the information, it became clearer and clearer to Ben that John Abaddon and his Colony Dominion organization were behind the murders, a fact brought home by the macabre photos of many of the victims’ bodies; apparently Abaddon demanded proof that his orders had been carried out. He then came across a photo of Robert and himself during a night out six months earlier. Ben was filled with rage. All the information displayed in the room pointed to one person behind all the disappearances, behind all the murders: John Abaddon.

Ben said to his persachip, “Download all data displayed in this room.”

The persachip replied, “Unable to comply. Security measures in place.”

Ben wondered for a moment if he might be able to get past Noah’s security, but knew his Presence skills were far inferior to Noah’s. He decided to take in as much of the information as possible himself. He looked at photos, he committed to memory lists and maps, he pored over

documents. He came across a vid of himself and Robert in Sirolo, eating gelato and walking along the piazza. He then thought of Noah's statement to him earlier: "Remember Italy." He thought a moment, then said to his persachip, "Download all displayed data. Access: Monte Conero." But nothing happened. He then said, "Gelato". Still nothing. He tried "Stracciatella", "Honeymoon", and then "Sirolo". His persachip responded, "Data download complete." All the data had been downloaded to his persachip. Ben then shut down the Presence array and gave the order, "Delete all data."

Ben picked up Noah's body and placed him on his bed. As he slipped out the front door an ambulance arrived, which had been automatically notified of Noah's need of assistance when he fell unconscious. As the digital paramedics rushed past, he stood in front of the apartment building, looking down the row of townhouses and bungalows, some of which were over 150 years old. The rain had stopped; the sun peaked out from behind the clouds. His eyes were laser-focused, his mouth set firm. A young girl rode past on her pink, tasseled Skiin, ringing a holographic bike bell. Ben watched her disappear around the corner on a pathway that led to the park. He said to the portable trow pod device, "Self-trow to State Department, office of Maria Verdugo, Washington, D.C., execute."

An image of Noah Asher floated above the table in the long, narrow cloister of St. Bartholomew's Church. The sun's rays danced through the thick glass window panes, landing in small patches on the floor and reflecting off the reddish terra cotta tiles to illuminate the stone and brick arched ceiling suspended above.

John Abaddon was, as ever, positioned at the head of the small table, addressing these particular Colony Dominion members for, he posited, the final time. His favored black suit juxtaposed with his tyrannical rantings to deliver the apprehension and acquiescence he desired from his subjects.

"Mr. Asher will no longer be counted amongst our brethren."

Abaddon's speech and aspect had shifted. He sounded ever more shrill; he behaved ever more despotic; he laid bare his basest thoughts and instincts; he felt he was finally able to display to the world the strong, confident leader he saw in himself. "I trust Mr. Asher will be the last of the traitors amongst us."

Despite the echoing effects the hard stone and brick structure produced, there was not a sound in the cloister; the meeting attendees remained silent and still, chillingly aware of Noah's fate.

The image of Noah faded.

"This day has been long coming. We have set our goals, made our plans; we are on the threshold of restoring our nation to the powerful, celebrated empire God bestowed upon us. I look to you to remain strong and vigilant to the last."

Aldrich Taylor, this day dressed in vintage brown tweed, wrung his hands under the table. If he had had doubts in the past about his involvement with John Abaddon and Colony Dominion before, after his short visit to Antarctica he was feeling he had made a mistake altogether. But he knew he dare not show any outward signs of weakness. Like a schoolboy he raised his hand to ask a question, hoping to demonstrate his loyalty to both the cause and John Abaddon. "When will we learn of our assignments? I'm anxious to get started."

Abaddon turned his attention to Taylor. "Your tasks are to ensure misdirection and obfuscation as I put our plan into action." Abaddon was ready to reveal the totality of his plans.

"The next three days will see the United States and Countries plunged into unprecedented levels of chaos. We will destabilize their government as their President, Vice-President, and many

high office holders vanish, sometimes right before their astonished eyes, as did so many of our own countrymen, friends, and family under the forced quarantine thrust upon us by the U.S.C. The virus will be introduced into their teletransportation systems, resulting in a quarantine and time of isolation that will make Great Britain's 28-year quarantine seem trivial by comparison. We will infect every corner of the country. The British government will step in to offer our "oldest and closest allies" the aid and expertise we acquired during our own quarantine. Then, with the U.S.C. unable to offer the support and protection to those nations they unlawfully and fraudulently stole, we will help them secede from the oppressive U.S.C. and welcome them into the newly robust British Empire. At the same time we will initiate phase three: the introduction of the virus into the remaining four Global Sovereigns, assuring their nation-building plans are halted. Soon all five Global Sovereigns will be busy and vulnerable as they attempt to deal with the virus that will shortly infect over one billion people."

Taylor's hand went up again. "What can we expect in the coming days?"

"Tomorrow is E-Day – Empire Day. That is when I and a few other patriots take this fight to the ground, arriving at various locations in the U.S.C. to begin the process of destabilization. We will be in Chicago, where that state's governor will be attending a reelection rally – his last. We will be in Cincinnati, where the Vice-President will fail in his attempt to dedicate a new Presidential Library. 5,000 people will attend a city picnic in St. Louis, and over 55,000 will watch a soccer game in Los Angeles. I will personally attend the inaugural festivities at Atlantis City, where the opening ribbon will be cut by none other than U.S.C. President Greco Mintier, our ultimate target. By day's end 28 U.S.C. leaders will have disappeared and more than 100,000 will be infected with the virus that, thanks to the virus-enhancing effects of trowing, will grow exponentially in only a few days."

Abaddon's eyes were wide; he looked off into the distance. For a few moments he lost all awareness of his surroundings and stood in silence until a stone chip flaked off a ceiling arch and made a 'splatch' sound when it hit the floor. Abaddon looked around the room, envisioning the future he had in mind for his co-conspirators. "It is important you are vigilant with your schedule so that we may locate you in a moment's notice."

Aldrich Taylor wanted to jump out of his seat and flee the room. He had a feeling in his gut that something was not right and wondered how he had ever been talked into joining Colony Dominion. He remembered his wife, Eloise, who perished in the last few weeks of the quarantine.

The virus had taken hold and spread too completely throughout her body for Ephramin to reverse the effects. After her death his mind had grown cloudy and he succumbed to the overwhelming desire to blame someone for her loss. He now realized how John Abaddon had taken advantage of his vulnerability.

Abaddon continued. "Set your persachip to 'special private' and allow communication only with me." He looked around the room at the weak-minded people sitting around the old oak table. He knew they would all let him down, eventually, and that justified in his mind the fate for each of them he had already set in motion.

"This final meeting of Colony Dominion is adjourned. God save the Queen, and God save the great British Empire."

It had been a few years since Ben had been in the ‘Diplomats Room’ at the State Department. The walls had been painted a light gray, complementing the blue and gray rug with the Great Seal in the middle. On the two sides of the rug were a sofa opposite two wingback chairs, each covered in a medium brown plasztik faux leather. There were no windows and the door was reinforced steel, half a meter thick. At the opposite end of the room sat a trow pod.

Maria Verdugo, seated in one of the wingback chairs, rose to introduce the head of Special Forces to Ben. “I think you already know General Bradley Morgan?”

Ben stood when Morgan entered the room. He approached Morgan and the two men shook hands. “So, it’s General now, is it? I’m impressed. How are you Brad?”

“See what you gave up?”, said Morgan.

Ben knew what he had given up. “I think things are just as they should be,” Ben lied. He had formally given up his commission as Lt. Commander when he was asked to ‘slide over’ to the State Department. He could not perform his duties in Sobhi as a Lt. Commander in Special Forces, so he was made head of the State Department’s Office of Strategic Planning as a cover, which ultimately resulted in his relinquishing his future with Special Forces. It had been a tough transition for Ben.

He had worked with Morgan in Sobhi; they were good friends and had great respect for one another. Still, Ben was a bit jealous that Morgan had remained with Special Forces and had now become a General.

Ben felt good when he admitted, “I do miss the Forces, though.”

They sat on the sofa, opposite Verdugo, who said, “General Morgan, Ben is heading up our investigation into the recent rash of disappearances. I have assigned your unit to work with him.”

“We are at your disposal.”

Ben said, “We need to hit the ground running. I have information that certain forces are at play in the United Kingdom. We have a target, but we must be careful. He holds a powerful position in Parliament and has been very good at shielding himself from exposure.”

Verdugo said, “We are speaking of...?”

“John Abaddon.”

“That’s what our intelligence suggested, as well.”



“He is not universally liked over there,” said General Morgan, but those who do support him are formidable.

Ben kept from editorializing his feelings about Abaddon. “We are in possession of ample evidence that Abaddon is behind a number of disappearances around the world, most of whom were U.S.C. citizens. He has done this with the help of an organization of disillusioned British nationals, known as Colony Dominion. We now know they have further plans to destabilize the U.S.C., although precise details are unknown.”

“What exactly do we know?” asked the General.

“This information just came into my possession; someone paid a very high price to make sure it reached me.” The image of him holding Noah’s dead body entered his mind. “We have a list of potential targets, mostly public locations - prime targets for whatever mass attack they have in mind, but we don’t know which they will choose, or when.”

“What we don’t know is why Abaddon wants to destabilize the U.S.C.,” said Verdugo.

“Abaddon blames the U.S.C. for the United Kingdom’s descent during and after the quarantine. He lost his wife and son to the virus and is determined to punish the U.S.C., whom he believes is responsible for the quarantine.”

“Well, he’s right about that,” said Verdugo. “But there was no other choice...still is no other choice. The Mortiferum virus is more deadly and more virulent than anything we’ve seen since Ebola. It mutates with each infection; we haven’t been able to create a vaccine, and until we do, quarantine is the only viable alternative.”

“And Abaddon knows that. We think he is planning to create a world-wide epidemic and force countries, including the U.S.C., into their own quarantines. To what end, we can only surmise.”

“Revenge.” suggested General Morgan.

Ben said, “That is a hugely motivating factor. Abaddon has been behind the movement to expand the reach of the U.K., advocating for a new British Empire that would hold sway over key nations in the world. He feels that the U.K. was prevented from expanding the Empire because of the quarantine. While the rest of the world was dividing up the world to become part of the Five Global Sovereigns, the U.K. languished under the quarantine. There is widespread support for this view, so we must tread lightly.”

“Agreed. We don’t want this to spiral into an international incident,” said Verdugo.

“I don’t know how it can be anything but,” said Ben.

“I’ll contact Prime Minister Galbraith to see what he knows and where they stand on Abaddon. It may be too touchy a subject for them to assist us in the operation, but if we can at least garner their cooperation and share information, that would go a long way to keeping the peace.”

Ben stood. “We need to move on this right away. General, can we meet with your unit?”

“They are already at the Pentagon, awaiting orders.”

“I need to contact Piers at the Department of Justice to get hold of nine of the new trow pod devices Fereday sent them. Madam Secretary, can you authorize that handover?”

“I’ll talk to him and have them sent over immediately.”

“Good. We can do a quick training on them with your unit, General, then begin the search for Abaddon. And Madam Secretary, until we have a handle on this, you should consider foregoing any outside appointments. We should warn the White House, as well.”

Verdugo shook her head. “The President has already said he won’t be intimidated. Until we have reliable intel he’s staying on schedule.”

“Then we’ll need to beef up his security.”

“Do you really think Abaddon has the audacity to target a sitting President?”

“I think that he will stop at nothing to see his plans through to the end. I’m sending what we have to your security detail.”

“General Morgan, you meet with your team at the Pentagon. I’ll be right behind you. Then we’ll trow to London.”

“Right.”

“General, you are about to experience your first pod-free trow.” Ben picked up the portable trow pod, said, “Trow target to Room 45 C, The Pentagon, Washington, D.C.” He then pointed the device at General Morgan and said, “Execute”. The General was enveloped in a bluish light, then disappeared.”

Verdugo stood with her mouth agape, then said, “Remarkable.”

Ben said, “It’s a whole new world...and we’d better grab hold of it before it grabs hold of us.”

Ben was the final team member to arrive at St. Bartholomew's Church. He stayed until last so he could test the portable trow device's tracking feature. After the five Special Forces soldiers used their devices to self-trow from the Pentagon to the Cloister, Ben said to his device "Track trow". The device read all five of the trow signatures and reported that all had been transported to St. Bartholomew's, marking each event as 'trow1', 'trow2', and so on. Instead of speaking to the device, Ben pressed 'destination' on the display then manually entered 'trow1'. He then said, "Self-trow, execute."

It was 11:30 AM in Washington when the team arrived in London, where the local time was 4:30 PM, the waning rays of afternoon sun prisms through the Cloister's windows. Other than Ben's Special Forces team, the church was empty. He attempted to find any sign of Colony Dominion's Presence there; the Cloister echoing his request to his trow device, "Track trow". His device responded, "No tracking data available."

General Morgan said, "Captain Phillips, see if you can access Colony Dominion's Locale. Perhaps we can find some trace of it on the Presence, or maybe even someone's persachip."

Captain Maria Phillips had been in Special Forces for eight years. Her specialty was in technology and, like Noah, was an expert in Presence technology. "Right away, sir."

Captain Phillips opened a small, plastic box, which began sniffing the air for data. Phillips adjusted the settings, then began receiving information, which was displayed in front of her.

"I am able to retrieve partial data, Sir, but it looks like someone tried to purge all information from this Presence Locale."

General Morgan and Ben gathered near Phillips. "What have you got?" asked Ben.

"Bits and pieces of meeting records, although it appears they erased most of their Locale after each meeting. There are a few calendar entries, and a list of names, marked IT."

"Display the names."

Displayed in front of them was a partial list of names; Ben recognized three: Barton Smythe, Nathaniel Holbrook, and Teri Bristow. "I know these three. Smythe and Holbrook disappeared. I don't know what this list is, but I don't believe it can be a good thing that Bristow is on it."

Ben ordered his persachip to contact Bristow, who then appeared before him.

"Teri, where are you?"

“I’m in my office, Ben, why?”

“I am trying to track down John Abaddon. Teri, you need to be very careful.”

“Oh. Then you know.”

“Know what?”

“I have credible evidence that John Abaddon is planning something, possibly even today. But I can’t get anyone over here to lift a finger to stop him. I’ve contacted everyone from the Prime Minister on down. Everyone is either frightened out of their wits, or it’s the biggest conspiracy ever.”

“Or both. Look, I am with a Special Forces team. We’re here in London to stop Abaddon; we believe he is targeting the U.S.C.”

“Ben, can you trow to my office? I dare not send the information I have over the Presence.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Okay. Our trow pod is number UKP32...”

Ben cut her off. “No need for that. I’ll be right there.”

Ben disconnected the call, then said to his persachip, “Display coordinates of last call.” His persachip responded with the longitude, latitude, and altitude of Bristow’s office in Westminster Hall.

While he programmed the destination into his portable trow device, Ben said to General Morgan, “I’ll be back in a few minutes. We need to get as much information out of this Locale as we can.”

Morgan responded, “Phillips is as good as they come...we’ll get it.”

Ben then said, “Self-trow to destination. Execute.” Next thing Ben knew, he was standing in Bristow’s office. For only a moment he saw someone in the office, enveloped in a blue light, who then disappeared. The person seemed too large to have been Teri Bristow. Ben didn’t see any sign of her in the office. He set his trow device to ‘track trow’. Two trow signatures popped up on the display. One was trow18, a location only a few kilometers from Westminster Hall; the other was trow19, a location 6,000 meters above the Earth. Ben thought only a moment and conjectured that the second trow was the one he should pursue. He said to his device, “Retrieve subject, trow19”. The device responded, “Trow19 irretrievable – subject no longer located at destination.” Ben then said, “Self-trow to location trow19. Execute.”

A moment later Ben was in a freefall, hurtling toward the Earth. His body tumbled around and around, violently whipping his head, his arms flailing about. The sky above was a pale-blue while the clouds below were white. The tumbling of his body made it impossible for him to get his bearings. He let the rushing air tell him up from down; he placed his arms and legs in the freefall position, which stabilized him and slowed him down. He looked below and saw Teri Bristow, also hurtling toward the Earth. She seemed to be unconscious. Ben moved his arms to his sides and pointed his body toward Bristow, which sent him hurtling toward Bristow's tumbling body. The air was thin and he feared he might pass out from lack of oxygen. He also was aware that as they grew closer to the Earth, gravity would increase their speed. Ben calculated he had about 90 seconds before he would hit the ground. He set his trow device by saying as loudly as he could "Westminster Hall, set". He pointed the device at Bristow and yelled, "Execute", but the device could not find its target. Ben tried again and missed. He looked forward and saw the horizon growing closer as the landscape of the Earth loomed larger and larger. He managed to get within 200 meters of Bristow and once again pointed the device toward her, only to be met with the same results. Still, he was getting closer. When he finally reached her he grabbed her by her arm, but her spinning wouldn't allow him to maintain his hold. She was still unconscious; her body was spinning and thrown around, her arms and legs pummeling Ben with great force. He reached for her again and pulled her body close to his to stop her tumbling. He tried holding onto her shirt collar and allowed her body to move away from him so he could point the trow device toward her. He said, "Execute", but then lost his grip. Bristow spun out of control and away from him. He tried the trow again. "Execute!" Still the device could not lock onto her. Once again Bristow was spinning out of control and moving further away.

Looking to Bristow then to the Earth as it raced toward him, Ben calculated he had 10 seconds before he crashed into the ground. He said to the trow device, "Self-trow, execute." His final image before he was trown was of Teri Bristow's body about to hit the ground at over 1,200 kilometers per hour. He was glad he wouldn't see it happen.

Ben was trown to a hallway inside Westminster Hall, on the opposite end of the building from Teri Bristow's office. He materialized about a meter above the floor, then fell to the floor on his stomach. He drew his right hand into a fist, closed his eyes, and rebuked himself for his failure. He lay on the cold, marble floor for a few moments.

A security digital approached. Ben sat up and drew his knees to his chest.

The digital said, "Mr. Barnett, do you require assistance?"

Ben draped his arms over his knees, kept his head down, and said to the digital, "No, no...thank you."

He sat catching his breath. He wondered what Bristow knew that warranted her murder. After catching his breath he picked himself up and entered her office to see what he might find; there was no evidence of what she had alluded to in her call. Her Locale had been erased.

After several minutes Ben set the trow device to the Cloister at St. Bartholomew's to rejoin his team.

Ben arrived at the Cloister to find the team pacing the room, anxious to make their next move. General Morgan noticed Ben's disheveled uniform and wind-whipped hair. "Ben, are you all right? What happened?"

Ben ignored the question; he simply placed his hand on the General's shoulder. As he put himself in order, he said, "What have we got, General?"

"The Colony Dominion Locale is partially restored. We have identified one attack location today - a City Picnic in St. Louis, below the Gateway Arch. The Arch Park holds 5,000 people. We believe they will try to disperse the Mortiferum virus there. If they are successful, we could see up to half a million infected in less than a week before any symptoms appear."

Ben said, "So we shut them down before they can do that, then we concentrate on finding Abaddon."

"The problem," said the General, "is that their Locale indicates up to 18 coordinated attacks, but with only partial data we have no way to identify them...and we don't know if the other attacks are planned for today, tomorrow, next week, or next month."

Ben said, "We need to take out Abaddon's operatives, then interrogate them to find out about the other attacks. And if we can get to Abaddon we can stop all this before it begins."

"Right," said General Morgan. "Then let's get to it."

Along with General Morgan and Captain Phillips, Ben's team was comprised of Sergeant Anastasia Alyson, Sergeant Ilda Carbello, and Sergeant Jason Mohr. The Special Forces unit was personally handpicked by General Morgan and except for Sergeant Mohr, who had joined the unit eight months earlier, the unit had been working together for four years; under General Morgan's command the unit had been awarded three Special Commendations for undercover missions. These were the best of the best.

Ben called up an image of the Gateway Arch Park in St. Louis. "We can trow to this area along Gateway Trail, then spread out to identify Abaddon's operatives. Set your persachips to 'facial recognition: non-U.S.C. citizens', with constant alerts. We don't yet know who these people are, but we might get some help from their personal data. Still, we won't count on that. Most likely we're going to have to ID them ourselves. Once we do have positive IDs, we trow them to the holding cells at the Pentagon to begin interrogations. Those holding cells are already programmed

into your portable trow devices. We'll meet up back at the Pentagon at 22:00 hours, if not before. Questions?"

Sergeant Carbello spoke up. "If they're there to infect the crowd, shouldn't we take them out before they can release the virus?" Carbello loved weapons. She loved shooting her laser pistol and had won many sharp-shooting awards. She also loved her position in Special Forces. She had sacrificed a family life for it, but she was rarely alone. Wherever their missions took them, Carbello seemed to have a man chasing her. She'd turned down at least a dozen marriage proposals, always citing her 'special' job. She liked her current team more than any previous one; she had great respect for each team member and was certain she would 'jump a laser' for any of them.

Ben squinted his eyes and looked at Carbello and said, "Your orders are to capture them, not kill them. We need to get as much information out of them as possible. Trowing them will be just as effective. Kill orders will come only if absolutely necessary or if you absolutely have no other choice. We need these people alive."

Carbello scrunched up her face in disappointment. She instinctively patted her laser pistol, which calmed her.

General Morgan said, "Make sure your plasztik fatigues are set to 'environment' so we'll blend in."

"Anything else?" Ben asked, looking at each team member. Seeing that there were no other questions and that the team was ready to begin, he said, "Okay, let's go."

Ben watched as the team set their portable trow devices location to Gateway Arch Park, then executed self-trows one by one. Ben went last.

It was 12:00 in St. Louis and the city-wide picnic was already in full swing. Families sat at picnic tables set up in the food court as digitals circulated with prepared Chingel Burgers, Zuks, Haute Dogs, Tacolitos, and a variety of flavored nutrient waters. The weather was warm and people were anxious to get out of their homes for one of the final events of Summer.

Upon arrival in the shadow of the arch, the team's plasztik fatigues morphed into jeans and t-shirts, allowing them to blend into the crowd. Although their trow devices remained out in the open, their laser pistols were tucked away in a quickly accessible pocket of their uniform. Ben motioned for the team to disperse to begin looking over the attendees.

General Morgan and Sergeant Carbello circulated near the North Pond while Sergeants Alyson and Mohr took the South Pond area. Sergeant Phillips went to the museum and visitors'



center and Ben walked the Grand Staircase, which doubled as a performance space and where there was a Space Framing concert in progress by the band Future Prolux. The majority of people in the park were at the concert.

Ben took a seat on one of the stairs, which had been outfitted with small cushions. He looked down to the performance area and for a few moments got lost in the music. He thought back to his first date with Robert, at that Peyton concert. He smiled, remembering how much he had enjoyed sitting next to Robert and how much they had talked, after. That had been the night Ben knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Robert. Then the present caught up with him and he was instantly filled with rage, which he used to motivate himself to concentrate on the mission. He stood, turned, and nearly tripped over a man sitting to his right. Ben gathered himself and said, "Excuse me." The man did not respond. Ben continued to the end of the row and walked up to the top of the grand staircase as his persachip reported to him, "Positive identification, non-U.S.C. citizen." Ben turned quickly and said, "Display and locate." His persachip displayed an image of the identified person, which Ben recognized as the man he had just tripped over. He followed the holographic arrow displayed in front of him and looked down the rows of seats to where the man was sitting; he was looking around at the people gathered for the concert and seemed to be ignoring the concert itself. Ben said, "Team Alpha Century, possible target identified on Grand Staircase."

General Morgan responded, "Right. We're on our way," which signaled to the rest of the team to meet up with Ben.

On the stage the band was setting off pyrotechnics, their explosions sounding off in rhythm with the music. Ben's suspect, tall and very muscular, signaled to a second man a few rows down the staircase. The second man was of lesser build and bald, but still powerful looking; he responded to his counterpart with a nod. Ben thought they must be signaling to begin whatever it was they had planned.

The other team members arrived at the top of the Grand Staircase as they received images Ben sent of the two operatives. The team began approaching them. The two men rose and moved to the end of their respective rows. They removed devices from their pockets and released small drones which flew up to hover at about 100 meters. The drones dispersed a fine mist into the air which began to slowly fall toward the crowd. The wind was blowing and sent much of the mist over to one side of the audience, enjoying the concert and oblivious to the approaching infection.

The two men saw the team approaching with lasers aimed at them. They quickly set their portable trow devices to 'self-trow' and disappeared.

Ben yelled, "Track them!" As the team tracked the two operatives' trows, Ben approached a security digital and said to it, "Benjamin Barnett, Special Forces unit Alpha Century. Evacuate the park and disable all trow pods within a 50-kilometer radius." He knew the virus would infect many in the park, but at least he could slow the infection rate by shutting down trow pods.

The digital identified Ben, then responded, "Confirmed."

Ben ran to rejoin his team and asked, "Do we have them?"

Morgan replied, "They each transported to a different location: Cincinnati and Fort Knox."

Ben looked up and could barely make out the virus mist slowly descending; he knew they had to get out of there as quickly as possible. He said, "Okay, General, you, Phillips, and Alyson self-trow to Fort Knox. Carbello and Mohr, follow me to Cincinnati. Go!"

General Morgan was going to say, "Right", but he had already arrived in a parking lot outside a training facility in Fort Knox, Kentucky, with Phillips and Alyson right behind him. Morgan said to his persachip, "Display local human population." In front of him appeared a map of the army base, with dots representing human life signs. The largest gathering of people was inside the training facility. "There!" said Morgan, pointing to what was a former hangar. The team ran toward the building. Inside there was a 'Future Technology' event happening, with many high-ranking officers of all the armed services in attendance to see the latest in weapons technology. The room was a vast space, with a retractable plastic roof.

The three Special Forces soldiers entered the building on the heels of Abaddon's operative, who saw them enter. He was the smaller of the two operatives they had identified in St. Louis. He stood with his eyes wide and mouth agape, wondering how they had been able to follow him. But before the operative could give it too much thought, General Morgan set his trow device to "holding cell 3, The Pentagon, Washington, D.C.", then said, "execute." The operative was caught off guard; the next thing he knew he was in the cell, laser rifles pointed at him. The two guards at the Pentagon relieved him of his laser pistol and his trow device. The man attempted to contact his allies, but a digital medical floated into the cell; it sliced into the man's wrist and removed his persachip, which was placed in a box that prevented communication with the Presence.

Meanwhile, Ben, Carbello, and Mohr had arrived in Cincinnati. They appeared on the East side of a large hall that was filled with national and international dignitaries seated in rows of seats

facing a large dais, along with many invited guests. A dedication of the Pam Potts Presidential Library was taking place. Red, white, and blue banners with images of twigs at one end of each draped across the hall in rows. The hall's walls were filled with images and vids depicting events recorded during the 65<sup>th</sup> President's time in office. Pam Potts, along with former President Andrew Montgomery and current Vice President Charles Durand, was on the dais. The VP was being introduced by Speaker of the House Sheila Graham, who fought for the library to be located in Cincinnati, one of two cities in Ohio that Pam Potts called 'home'.

Despite the presence of two former Presidents – one his good friend - Ben knew he had to focus on the sitting Vice-President. He said softly to Carbello and Mohr, "See if you can identify Abaddon's operatives while I try to get Durand out of here." Ben then moved toward the front of the hall. As he approached the dais, the Vice President's security digital stopped him. Ben identified himself. "Benjamin Barnett, Special Forces Alpha Century. We have a situation here and we need to evacuate the Vice President and other dignitaries. We believe they are in imminent danger."

Ben turned to look out into the audience and spied two operatives. One was the larger man Ben had tracked from St. Louis, the other was of the same build, paler, and with red hair. They both pointed their portable trow devices toward the dais. Ben spun around and yelled, "Get down!" but he was too late. Duran and then Montgomery were both hit by the blue trow lights; they both disappeared.

The room erupted in mass hysteria. Crowds of people began running for the exits, overturning chairs and knocking over a life-size statue of President Potts. A few people were thrown to the ground and trampled.

Ben ran toward the operative he had recognized, but who had already transported out of there. Ben communicated with Carbello and Mohr: "Track the trows from the dais." Ben pointed his device to where the operatives had stood and said to his device, "Track trow." One piece of data came back: 'trow21'. It indicated the operative had transported himself to Las Vegas, Nevada. He was unable to get a fix on the other trow signature.

"Carbello, what is the status of Montgomery and Durand?"

Carbello responded, "We tracked trow19. They were transported 6,000 meters above Antarctica, but we are unable to retrieve them."

Ben knew that, like Sarah Bristow, the two men were now hurtling towards Earth and were probably already dead. “I’m sending you tracking data...self-trow to ‘trow21’...both of you.”

“On our way.”

Ben stopped in the middle of the chaos. While he watched a security digital usher former President Potts to a trow pod, he contacted one of the holding cell security guards at the Pentagon. “Begin interrogation of prisoners. We need to know the locations of all planned attacks. Highest priority. Use of Cranial D authorized.”

At the Pentagon the two guards looked at each other, both thinking about the implications of their orders. “Sir, would you repeat that order?”

Cranial D was a highly effective truth serum, but its use resulted in permanent brain damage; it had been banned for use on humans. Ben was against its use; he had testified in Congress for the ban on using it, even in grave situations. He let his rage at Robert’s loss make this decision. He repeated to the guards, “Cranial D authorized. I’ll take full responsibility.”

Ben communicated with General Morgan. “What is your status?”

Morgan replied, “Subject identified and transported to holding cell. No negative impact, here.”

As Ben communicated the next trow destination to the team, he said, “Understood. Join us at location just sent you.”

“Right.”

Ben set his own device and hit ‘execute’ on the display just as the entire dais collapsed. He was transported to Las Vegas. Immediately he felt the stifling 102 degree air stinging his nostrils. Spectators were lined along the streets, awaiting the 28<sup>th</sup> *Las Vegas Cash Run Bicycle Race* participants to come whizzing by. Most everyone had a Skiin at their feet or a Classic Skiin parked nearby. The race would begin and end at the new Moon Hotel and Casino on ‘The Strip’, South Las Vegas Boulevard. While the rest of the world had refashioned obsolete streets into parks and living space, Las Vegas decided to retain its world-famous boulevard. It was now used by pedestrians and Skiins, and for events like the bike race.

A woman in plaztik shorts bumped into Ben just after he appeared before her. She screamed, then turned to rejoin her husband, saying, “Carlos, a man just appeared in front of me out of thin air!”

Her husband replied, “Relax, Norma, it was probably just a hologram.”

“This was *not* a hologram. I know a hologram when I see one. It was a real, flesh and blood man. He just appeared right in front of me. I felt him!”

Ben walked in the opposite direction and joined his team. “It’s going to be difficult to identify Abaddon’s people. We’re going to have to spread out and hope we find them using facial recognition.”

Sergeant Alyson was anxious when she arrived in Las Vegas; she did not voice why. She said, “There’s a major gathering at the finish line, we might concentrate our search there.”

Ben wanted to search the entire area, but agreed that they should focus where was the largest gathering of people. “Okay. General, Carbello, Mohr, Phillips, you search near the finish line. Alyson and I will look along the race route.” Sergeant Alyson didn’t like those orders, but nodded her head, all the time checking her surroundings, looking for familiar faces. Alyson lived in Las Vegas; her husband and children had told her they were attending the bike race. She had a special interest in seeing to it that the infection did not happen.

The race route was 25 kilometers long, proving a daunting task for six people to cover. Much of the route wound through the desert; there were few spectators there, so Ben didn’t worry about those areas. But there were 8,000 people dispersed along the five kilometer, in-town portion of the race; Ben did worry about that. Even accessing the city’s surveillance system, it would be difficult to identify them all in a timely manner. Abaddon’s operatives seemed to be working very quickly, completing their missions at each location, then moving to the next. The team needed to identify them as fast as possible.

General Morgan and the three Sergeants began searching near the finish line, splitting the area into four sections. Each had the job of picking Abaddon’s operatives out of about 3,000 faces. They mingled among the crowd as their persachips processed and identified each face.

Ben and Carbello walked along the route, north of the finish line. They passed hundreds of people, their persachips processing their IDs instantaneously. Ben was concentrating on his search and did not notice a man approach him and take hold of his upper arms.

“Ben? Ben Barnett! What are you doing here?”

Ben quickly broke the man’s grip and was about to pull out his laser weapon, but then he recognized his old friend from college, Pritam Velshi. “Pritam!”

“It’s been years. How have you been? What are you up to these days? Are you still with the State Department?” Ben remembered his college days, sharing an apartment with Pritam, trying

to get a word in edgewise. “We should get together. You should come stay with us in Havana. We have a great little place there. I mean my wife and me. Did you know I was married? Great lady. Works for the India Development Council. We have two kids. They’d love you...you’d love them! You really ought to come!”

“Pritam! I’ve got to go. I’ll send you my contact and we’ll get together.”

Ben didn’t want to appear as though he was blowing Pritam off, but he had no choice. He continued making his way down the race route as Pritam’s voice faded behind him. “You need to get away and relax. You were always too harried. You should enjoy life. I’ll call you and we’ll get together!”

Near the finish line Sergeant Mohr stood on a corner, looking over the crowd. He spotted a man pulling a device from his pocket. It seemed to be the same type of virus dispersal drone he had seen in St. Louis. He ran toward the man, pushing spectators out of his way. As he reached him, the man released his drone into the air. Mohr pulled his laser weapon and aimed for the device; he pulled the trigger. Instantly the drone was disintegrated. A few people in the crowd saw this. One woman approached Mohr and began yelling at him. “What did you do that for? Who are you? The police? You have no right to destroy someone’s property. We have strict property rights in this country, you know. You better have a good reason for doing that.”

A few meters away one of the operatives noticed the commotion and rushed to release his dispersal drone as quickly as he could. The drone, rising into the air, caught the attention of the crowd, interested in the outmoded flying machine; they didn’t see many of them, these days. It also caught the attention of Sergeant Mohr. He began walking quickly toward the man as he reported to his team, “Subject identified with dispersal device.” Before Ben could respond Mohr pulled his laser weapon and aimed it at the operative. “Stand down.” People near the man began pushing their way through the crowd to get away. The man did not stand down; he continued his actions to release the dispersal drone. Sergeant Mohr fired his weapon, which opened a hole in the man’s chest and heart. He fell to the ground, but that did not stop the drone. It quickly rose to about 10 meters overhead and hovered. A mist began to rain down and quickly reached the crowd. Mohr could see the mist coming his way. He took in a massive breath and tried to hold it, knowing that it was a useless gesture; the moment a molecule of the mist touched his skin he would be infected. He reached the operative lying prone on the ground, bent over him, and checked his wrist; it

glowed red. He rose to communicate with the team and was forced to breath. His lungs stung slightly as he inhaled, informing him that he had inhaled some of the virus.

On the race route, Sergeant Alyson was weaving her way through the crowd, looking at every face, every body, every piece of clothing, anything she could use to identify the operatives. As she walked around a bend in the bike route a man with a crooked nose and a missing tooth passed her. She did not notice him. Upon passing the man turned and aimed his portable trow device toward her. It was still set for the location above Antarctica. He said, "Execute". The blue light illuminated Alyson for a split second, then she was gone. A handful of people along the route who saw her disappear began screaming and running to get away from the area. They spilled out onto the street, toppling a couple of passing bikers. The operative reset the trow device's destination, then said, "Self-trow, Execute."

Ben's persachip reported that Sergeant Alyson was no longer present and contacted General Morgan.

"We've lost Alyson. There is no sign of her on the Presence. Can only assume the worst. What is your status?"

"Second operative identified and eliminated, however, virus dispersal initiated. Sergeant Mohr infected."

Ben realized they did not know the consequences of teletransporting an infected person with the portable trow devices. Would it result in mass infection, like it had in the U.K.? "Sergeant Mohr, do not self-transport. Repeat, do not self-transport."

Just then Morgan heard a scream from the crowd. He looked up to see people creating an empty space as they moved away from the area where the scream had emanated. A man in the crowd said, "He just disappeared!" Another man said, "It's Vegas, people...it's just a magic trick." General Morgan approached the area and pointed his trow device. "Track trow." The device reported that there was a trow from that location, 'trow25', to the Los Angeles Stadium. Morgan reported to Ben and the team, "We have another target location. Subject transported to L.A. Stadium."

Ben said, "Morgan, Phillips, Carbello, trow to the Stadium. Sergeant Mohr, stand down from the mission. Work with local authorities to minimize the infection, and see if there are more operatives still in the area. Oh, and shut down all trow pods in the city until we know the extent of the infection."

Ben felt he and the team were losing the battle; the attacks were resulting in more damage than he cared to concede. At this rate the operatives were going to achieve their objectives. He knew they had to find Abaddon to stop them and they needed to get one of the operatives to talk, but he knew there was little chance these highly-trained people would break. On a mission with Special Forces several years earlier Ben had watched as one of his captives set off a self-destruct laser module rather than allow herself to be interrogated.

Before trowing to the L.A. Stadium Ben contacted the guards at the Pentagon. “Do we know anything?”

“Negative. Have administered Cranial D; waiting for serum to take effect.”

“Let me know when it does and you have something.” Ben ended the call; he knew he had to move forward and said to the portable trow device, “Set location to tracked trow25. Execute.”

The Los Angeles Stadium was filled to capacity with over 55,000 fans there for a game between True Los Angeles and Manchester United. A recent trade had resulted in Manchester United’s Gaspar Angelico moving to True Los Angeles. About 5,000 Manchester United soccer fans had trown from England to see the game; the other 50,000 attendees were there to gloat over their acquisition. None could have any inkling of what was about to happen.

Ben joined his shrinking team, whose plaztik clothing had already morphed into stadium-appropriate shorts and jerseys and sneakers. General Morgan, Carbello, and Phillips had all been transported to the stadium’s field side, just off the main playing area. Once again a few people noticed their sudden appearance, but most thought they were holograms and part of the cheerleading squads.

The team looked up at the packed stadium, filled with endless rows of faces, jumping up and down, waving their arms, and wondered how they were going to ID a handful of operatives among all those people. General Morgan said, “This is going to be tough. Where do we even begin?”

Phillips responded, “It’s impossible. There must be 50,000 people here; we’ll never be able to identify them all. We need reinforcements.”

Carbello cocked her head over her shoulder. “Ever the optimist, eh Maria?”

Phillips smiled at Carbello and said, “I like to think of myself as a realist.”

Ben reasoned, “We tracked the last trow to this spot; at least one of the operatives has to be nearby. We were only seconds behind him, so we start here, at field level.”



“Unless he’s already trown somewhere else,” opined Phillips.

Ben pointed to a tunnel leading to the locker rooms and, eventually, the stadium seating areas. “General, you and Carbello start in that tunnel, just there. Phillips and I will head up those stairs leading to the lower level seats. We’ll need to move to the upper levels quickly; that’s where Abaddon’s men will most likely disperse the virus for maximum effect.”

“Right,” came Morgan’s affirmation as the team began their search. He and Carbello entered the tunnel. Inside the tunnel, protected from the sun, it was several degrees cooler. They passed a door marked ‘ELECTRICAL’. This was the room where was located the connections to the stadium’s energy array, which supplied the wireless energy system. General Morgan surmised that sabotage might begin there. He took hold of the handle and tried to open the door, but it was locked tight.

The next opening led to the two teams’ locker rooms. A digital security guard was positioned at the entrance; the digital’s connection to the Presence meant it recognized Morgan and Carbello. From the digital they downloaded the identities of all who had passed through the tunnel in the last hour. There was nothing unusual in the data. They continued on through the tunnel and came upon the administration area, which was the tunnel’s end, and which led to the stadium’s seating. They took the stairs and emerged at the first tier of seats.

The soccer game was just beginning the second half; Manchester United led True Los Angeles 2 to 1. The fans of True Los Angeles showed their displeasure with their team by stomping their feet and waving ‘True To The End’ pennants. Holographic banners of both teams floated over the crowd as mechanical servers hovered among the fans, delivering all manner of food and, of course, beer. During breaks in the play, holographic images of team mascots, cheerleaders, and fireworks filled the air above the field.

Ben and Phillips made their way to the upper level of the stadium, performing facial recognition as they went. The search was made difficult because their persachips had been set to ‘non-U.S. citizens’, and there were many in the stadium. Ben received alerts from his persachip, but none of the identified fit what he now knew about the operatives.

Ben and Phillips split up, Ben moving East and Phillips moving West. Ben walked to the top of the upper-most tier and moved along the pedestrian lane that ran across the top of the stadium while Phillips walked up and down the aisles. Crossing seven seating sections, Ben turned and began walking down one of the aisles. He had stopped near an exit and leaned against a pillar,

looking over the crowd for anything unusual, when a drone whizzed past his head, then hovered about three meters up from the seats. Ben whipped his trow device around, then said, "Set location to trow19," which Ben remembered had been the trow over Antarctica. He hoped that, at the cold southern edge of Earth, the virus couldn't do much harm. He aimed the trow device at the drone and said, "Execute." The blue light hit its target, surrounded the drone, and it disappeared. A few people in the stands saw the drone vanish, but most thought the sun had obscured their vision or that it flew away quickly.

Ben turned to the direction from where the drone had come and saw a man about three meters away holding a portable trow device. As the man set his trow device location and attempted a self-trow, Ben ran up the concrete steps as fast as he could. He smacked the trow device from the man's hands, which fell to the floor then disappeared under a stadium seat. Ben jumped on the man and they both crashed down the steps. Ben landed on top. He pinned the man down, holding his hands above his head with one hand and punched him in the face with the other. Ben yelled, "Alpha Team, assistance!" The operative struggled to get free. Ben flipped the man onto his stomach and wrenched an arm behind his back, threatening to break it. "What is your next target?" The operative did not respond. The man gathered all his strength and managed to right himself and lifted Ben up and tossed him backwards. Ben fell into fans sitting in the row of seats behind him. Popcorn and cups of beer and bottled flaves went flying. Ben recovered, stood, then kicked his leg high and connected with the man's head, which was violently thrown backward. Ben ran hard into his target. He grabbed his head and smashed it against a concrete support. The man fell to the floor, blood oozing from the back of his head. He was unconscious. Ben searched the man and removed from him a laser weapon. He rose, aimed his trow device at the bleeding operative and said, "Set location to Holding Cell 4, The Pentagon, Washington, D.C., execute." The man disappeared, which caused more hysteria from people than the fight had.

Ben stood a moment, his breathing deep and rapid. He called the Pentagon guards. "Do you have...any information?"

"Yes sir. We believe there are a total of four operatives assigned to various missions today."

'Four', Ben thought. Now he knew what he was dealing with; the team had encountered all four, and eliminated two. "And John Abaddon?"

"John Abaddon is at Atlantis City."

Ben knew the President was scheduled to be at the Atlantis City opening. It now made sense to Ben that all the past chaos was merely a prelude to Abaddon's ultimate goal of destabilizing the U.S.C. government and infecting enough people to witness the U.S.C. enter into its own quarantine. But it was the murder of Robert that filled Ben with the determination to succeed with this mission, a determination he had never experienced before, and, disturbingly, a feeling of growing exhilaration. He vowed that the day would end with Abaddon behind bars and his plans – his life – in shreds.

Ben wished he had been more adamant during his meeting with Maria Verdugo about ensuring the President's security. He needed to get his team to the grand opening as fast as possible to stop Abaddon. "General Morgan, we have intel on ultimate target. All trow to Atlantis City. I'm sending you coordinates." Ben sent exact coordinates so that there was no possibility the team would materialize outside the dome.

The completed underwater city was a wonder of ingenuity and innovation. 5,000 hectares of ocean bottom had been transformed into a post-modern city, demonstrating what could be created in places previously thought impossible. The lights from the city attracted all manner of aquatic life to the dome, affording a glimpse into a vast, beautiful undersea world. Besides the strange looking frilled shark, with its wide mouth and vertical rows of sharp teeth, the fangtooth fish constantly displayed its long, thin teeth as it foraged for crustaceans and deep-water squid. Giant tube worms lawned the ocean floor, surrounding a nearby hydrothermal vent, their white and red tubular structures spewing hot, toxic gases. Rarer were sightings of bristlemouths, anglerfish, viperfish, and some species of eelpout.

Visitors to the grand opening arrived via trow pods located at a pink coral rock arch leading to three avenues that continued to one of three main areas of the city. Take Columbus Boulevard, the avenue to the left, to walk through residences of houses, townhomes, and apartments that mimicked the surrounding ocean; a park and playground anchored the neighborhood of yellow brain coral facades accented by mother-of-pearl doors. Cook Boulevard, to the right, led to the commercial area, where there were located shops and services, the medical complex, and city-government offices. The center avenue, named Americus Boulevard, contained the civic heart of Atlantis City, with cinemas, restaurants, a concert venue, a sports complex, and an outdoor amphitheater, all shimmering like an iridescent pearl.

More than 1,000 people had been invited to discover, explore, and test the new city's livability. Most spent the week-long celebration staying in the three-story Hotel Plato, while a few occupied apartments that ultimately would be the homes of more than 3,000 permanent residents. The air was fresh and clean, the temperature a constant, and perfectly comfortable, 21 degrees Celsius.

When Ben and his team materialized at a tennis court in the sports complex, people were already gathered at the amphitheater, where President Mintier was scheduled to officially open the city.

Ben called up a map of Atlantis City and pointed to the amphitheater. "This is where today's dedication will take place. This should be where we will find John Abaddon. You have his data in your persachip so it should be a quick task to locate him. And keep an eye out for more of his henchmen. You three start searching the amphitheater. I need to get the President out of here."

The map disappeared and the team moved out. Ben headed for the food bodega, behind the amphitheater, where he found the President and his family. "Hello, Mr. President."

"Ben Barnett." They shook hands. "You should be very proud of what Fereday, and you, have built here."

"Excuse me, Mr. President, but we have reason to believe Atlantis City will be attacked, today. We need you to return to the White House immediately."

The President dropped his arms and cocked his head and pinched his lips together. "What kind of attack?"

"We believe operatives of a foreign agent will attempt to disperse the Mortiferum virus, perhaps even try to destroy the city. My team has been working to neutralize attacks all over the U.S.C. today. We need to get you out of Atlantis City right away."

"Ben, I know about your mission, but I have the best security in the world. They have checked out everyone in the city. I think they..."

"All due respect, sir, they don't know these people...and they don't have the weapon these people have. You are their main target; you and your family are in imminent danger."

The President's wife, who had not been particularly comfortable trowing her family two kilometers under the Atlantic Ocean, said, "Greco, perhaps we should do as he says."

Ben continued, "I set my trow device to transport you directly to the Oval Office."

When Ben aimed the device toward the President, two security digitals stepped in between Ben and the President; one took hold of the device. The President said, “It’s okay, you can let go. This is a portable trow device...it’s okay.” The two digitals moved behind the President.

Ben looked at the President, his eyebrows arched upward. Knowing this President’s predilection toward blissful ignorance, he was surprised he was as aware of the new weapons as he was. “Mr. President, you know about these devices?”

“They have been a top priority for me. Fereday has been working on them for a long time; they will be a formidable weapon in our arsenal and will help the U.S.C. secure its place as a Global Sovereign not to be underestimated.”

Ben didn’t feel he had time to discuss with the President the implications of the portable trow devices falling into the wrong hands; he found it ironic that the President and his family were put in danger by the same device he couldn’t wait to get his hands on. “Ready to transport, Mr. President.”

“No. Wait. My wife and daughter go first.”

“All due respect, Mr. President, but we need to ensure your safety.” Ben expected the argument from the President; he saw the President standing firmly in place, his arms crossed across his chest.

Ben didn’t want to waste more time. He said to the First Lady, “Ma’am, I’ll send Kayla right behind you.” Ben aimed carefully, knowing that missing his target could result in an accidental trow of the city’s dome, a bit like a gun going off in a jetliner.

Before the First Lady could nod her head she had been transported to the Oval Office. Ben then aimed the trow device at Kayla and said, “Execute”.

“And now, Mr. President...”

President Mintier took a step to his left, then nodded to Ben. Ben raised the device to the President. He saw over the President’s shoulder another portable trow device pointed at Mintier. Ben grabbed the President by the arm and yanked him aside as a digital security guard moved in to protect him. The operative again aimed at the President. The digital security moved to the President’s side and tossed him out of the way. The device’s blue light hit the digital, which was transported – to where was anyone’s guess and Ben didn’t have time to spend trying to save a DH.

The operative turned to run from the bodega. Ben started to follow, stopped, then turned to the President. He aimed his trow device at President Mintier and transported him to the White

House. He contacted his team, “Suspect leaving amphitheater; he’s coming your way. Track and neutralize.” Ben sent the suspect’s image and tracking data to the team.

General Morgan responded, “Both suspects identified; we are tracking.”

The team moved slowly through the gathering crowd in the amphitheater. Their persachips constantly sent them alerts, identifying every fifth or so person as non-U.S.C. citizens. Carbello set her persachip to silent. Phillips continued to look at every alert sent him, hoping he could identify the operative. He came across one of the identified faces, which he remembered seeing earlier in St. Louis. Even though he had not been identified as one of Abaddon’s operatives, he knew it was too great a coincidence that the same man was at two of the target locations. He looked at the man’s data expressed to him by his persachip and learned that he had worked in Parliament several years earlier, as an assistant to John Abaddon. That was all he needed. Phillips stealthily approached the man, aimed his trow device and said, “Execute”. The man found himself in Cell 5 at The Pentagon, where the two guards relieved him of his weapon, trow device, and persachip.

Phillips reported to the team. “Operative neutralized and captured.”

General Morgan responded, “Good work, Sergeant. Continue searching. Minimum of two targets remaining, including John Abaddon. ID Abaddon only; do not approach. He is to be arrested by me or Lt. Commander Barnett.”

After the President had been safely transported out of Atlantis City, Ben set his trow device location to holding cell 6 at the Pentagon then took off after the first operative. When he went out the bodega he saw Jose and Gleeson, who had been two of the site managers during construction, running toward him.

“We just heard from Norberg...she said we’re supposed to help evacuate the city”, said Jose. “What’s going on?”

“No time,” said Ben. “Just do what you can to make sure the trow pods haven’t been sabotaged.” Ben then ran in the direction the operative had run.

The man was agile, easily leaping over a hedge circling a water fountain, then he careened around a young woman passing on a Skiin, turning the corner at the grocery store. Ben followed close behind. When Ben turned the corner he saw both the operative and John Abaddon, setting their trow devices. The two men knew they were being followed and executed self-trows. Both disappeared.

Ben ran to where the men had been standing, aimed his device, and said, “track trow”. Data on two trows came back: one was to a bar in London, the other to Westminster Hall. Ben said aloud, “Gotcha’.” He set his device to the Westminster location and said, “Self-trow, execute.”

In moments Ben found himself in the large, empty hall at Westminster. He looked around for any movement. He heard the echo of footsteps and turned to see Abaddon exiting through the hall’s tall, oak and glass doors.

“John Abaddon!” Ben shouted.

Abaddon stopped, then slowly turned. His eyes widened, his mouth went slack when he recognized Ben. “Clever man”, he said as he walked toward Ben. “I suppose I needn’t be too awfully impressed; it’s not a stretch of the imagination that anyone could guess my whereabouts.”

“Yes, you are rather transparent.”

“Ah! So figured me out, have you?”

“Not much to figure out, really.” Ben looked around the hall as he spoke, ensuring they were alone. “A political ne’er-do-well, angry that the world has passed him by.”

“Ne’er-do-well?” Abaddon grinned and placed his forefinger to his lips. “You talk of ne’er do wells? You reside in a glass house, my friend.” The two men were now standing ten meters from one another. “Let’s see...how many landings have you made in your career? First there was an attempt at a medical career, then that failed soccer career, then a stint in Special Forces, a few years as a spy...oops! I mean in the State Department. Then you wound your way through Fereday. You’re like a little homeless bird, searching for his nest. I suppose you thought Robert Connor was going to be your salvation?”

Ben took a step toward Abaddon; he balled up his fists; his face turned red. “For what you did to Robert...”

“What I did? What I did.”

Abaddon looked up at the great oak ceiling, its sturdy oak buttresses still magnificent after 950 years and at least three catastrophic events that nearly destroyed it all. “You should thank me, really. I freed you from all that pending domesticity. How are you going to go through life, continuing to be the little lost boy, if Robert Connor is there to show you the way home? No, my friend, you may not know it yet, but I did you the greatest of favors.”

Ben’s mind was a fog of rage. He pulled his laser weapon and aimed it at Abaddon. Abaddon did not move.

“Now, now. Musn’t let our anger get the best of us. You don’t want to start an international incident, do you? Especially here in this great hall that has withstood fires, bombings, and Parliament. I’m really rather certain Westminster Hall will survive Benjamin Barnett.”

Ben’s hand shook. He placed his finger on the trigger; his mind screamed, “Shoot, *shoot!*”

“As glad as I would be to see you with a hole through your heart, I won’t let you off that easily. You think the quarantine was bad; you’ll learn what real isolation is when you sit in a prison cell the rest of your life.”

“That, my friend, is not going to happen. I have too many friends in all the right places. After I’m through the events of today will seem a trifle, and you and the U.S.C. will be exposed for what you are: greedy, land-grabbing invaders trying to add the British Empire to your list of the vanquished. I will not allow that to happen, and when I show the world who we are, the British people will place me on the *throne!*”

“You’re delusional. The only place you’re going is to Antarctica Prison.”

“I think not, my friend.” Abaddon then said to his trow device, “set trow G12, Self-trow, execute!”

Ben fired his weapon almost without thinking. A laser shot toward Abaddon, then continued through the blue light surrounding him. Abaddon disappeared. The laser beam hit the glass in one of the doors. It shattered and rained pieces to the floor.

Ben ran to the spot where Abaddon had stood and said, “Track trow.”

The device reported, “One trow to Berlin, Germany.”

Ben set his device to the same location, then said, “Self-trow, execute.”

Ben materialized on a street in Berlin. Only a few steps ahead of him was Abaddon, walking the street, seemingly looking in shop windows. Abaddon’s persachip alerted him to Ben’s presence. He turned to see Ben approaching. His heart raced as he wondered how Ben was able to follow him. “So,” he thought, “Fereday has improved on their trow devices.” He set the device to, “Verne Hotel, Islamorada, Florida,” then executed a self-trow.

Ben again tracked Abaddon’s trow and followed him. He materialized in the lobby of the Jules Verne Underwater Hotel in the Florida Keys, 25 meters under the ocean’s surface.

Abaddon stood waiting for Ben to appear. He aimed his trow device at Ben and said, “Execute.” Ben dropped and rolled on the floor. The device’s energy moved past where Ben had stood and engulfed the wall behind. A portion of a supporting metal beam disappeared and the



metal structure of the hotel groaned as water began seeping into the lobby. Then Abaddon disappeared.

Ben yelled, "Everyone evacuate!" then again tracked Abaddon's trow and followed him. He materialized in one of Fereday's old, abandoned space stations, in a degrading orbit around the Earth. At the moment Ben appeared, Abaddon executed a trow aimed at the space station structure. He then executed a self-trow and was transported away.

The steel structure behind Ben opened up, sucking the air out and pulling Ben toward it. His lungs emptied; his head pounded and he fought to keep from going unconscious. He was about to be hurtled into space when he grabbed onto a bent metal rod protruding from the wall. He fought to keep from being sucked out, the rushing air whipping his body as if he was in a hurricane. Ben wrenched his trow device in front of him and pressed 'track trow' on the device's screen. He didn't care where he was going, he just needed to be someplace, anyplace else. As the last atoms of air were thrown into space, he executed the trow; the space station imploded and was pulled down into Earth's orbit. It broke apart, most of it burning up as it entered Earth's atmosphere. Pieces of the space station, the largest the size of a refrigerator, were strewn across a stretch of Montana and Canada.

Ben materialized on his back on a cool, hard concrete floor. He drew in air, filling his aching lungs. He knew at once where he was. He froze. Abaddon was standing over him, his trow device aimed at Ben's head; behind Abaddon Ben could see the peak of Mt. Everest through the transparent walls. "Mt. Everest Café," he thought.

Ben looked around him to find something to help him get out of this situation. He said to Abaddon, "By my count you've trown at least seven times today...your next trow might not feel very good."

Abaddon's mouth pulled back into a pursed-lip grin; he said, "Don't worry about me; you'll be joining Robert very soon...how does *that* feel?"

Ben looked Abaddon in the eyes and said, "I gotta' tell ya', I'm a little miffed."

Ben grabbed a chair by the leg and swung it toward Abaddon, who saw the chair coming and jumped in the air as the chair swept under his feet. Ben used the moment to spring upward, using his legs to catapult him up and toward Abaddon. He lunged at Abaddon and knocked his trow device to the floor. Ben picked it up and smashed it on the top of a table, rendering it inoperative. Café patrons turned their attention to the commotion; Andry summoned security.

Abaddon then attempted to wrench Ben's trow device from him. Ben held onto the device and the two struggled for control of it. With both men holding tight to the device, Abaddon hit the 'execute' button on the display. The device went off and hit the glass wall that faced the mountain peak. A huge portion of Plexon disappeared, opening a gaping hole. Cold air and wind poured into the restaurant; the temperature quickly dropped to 0 degrees and kept falling. The café's patrons panicked and scrambled to protect themselves. Some rushed for the trow pod while others ripped snowsuits from the emergency locker.

Ben wrested control of the trow device and aimed it at Abaddon, who ran out the shattered window. Ben gave chase. Passing just below Everest's peak, Abaddon grabbed hold of a flagpole, turned, and attempted to impale Ben with it. Ben stopped the flagpole from hitting him and knocked it from Abaddon's hands. Abaddon again turned to run. Ben caught up with him and jumped on him. They rolled down the mountain a few meters, then tumbled over a ledge, falling six meters down and landing on an outcropping. Before Ben could aim his trow device, Abaddon grabbed it and threw it over the edge. The device landed on some rocks four meters below, then began sliding down, stopping in the snow about 30 meters down the mountain.

Ben pulled Abaddon up by his shirt collar and connected with a right punch. He hit Abaddon several times. Having taken some of the fight out of him, Ben yelled, "Why? Why Robert?"

Abaddon spit blood, which immediately froze on his lips and chin. He screamed, "The U.S.C. is drunk with power. You claim to care about the world. You only care about being an overgrown behemoth. Where were you when millions of my people languished in overstuffed hospitals, when they lay dying in the streets? Why weren't you asking "why" when my son was screaming in agony? Why? I'm going to make certain you never do to anyone else what you did to me! Robert is gone...forever. Now you know how it feels. You, and the United States and Countries will suffer the same as I have!"

Abaddon broke Ben's hold, sprang up on his knees, then hit Ben in the jaw. Ben fell backward as Abaddon scrambled up and began running. He jumped over the ledge, landed four meters below, then ran toward the trow device. Ben threw himself over the edge and chased Abaddon.

Both men were slowing due to the frigid -35 degree air. As Ben jumped over the ledge, Abaddon aimed the device at Ben and said, "Execute trow". Ben smashed into Abaddon and

twisted the device from him. It fell onto the snow-covered ground as the two men fought. Abaddon connected a few blows to Ben's face, then got Ben in a choke-hold. Ben couldn't allow this to go on or he knew he would pass out, which he knew in this cold was a death-knell. He managed to shove his hand up and connected with Abaddon's chin; the cold forced him to release his grip on Ben.

Both their bodies growing ever more numb, they could now barely move their hands. They were locked together but could not do more than tumble down the mountain as one. Abaddon broke away. He picked up a large stone and brought it downward to smash Ben's head. Ben gathered all his will and strength and held up his hands to block the stone. It hit him in the chest and he turned over on his side, a broken rib poking his lung. Ben saw the trow device just in front of him, and an opening in the mountain just beyond. Abaddon picked up the stone and raised it high to finish him off, again aiming for Ben's head. Forcing himself to move his arms as fast as possible, he picked up the device, pointed it at Abaddon, and screamed, "three meters south, execute." Abaddon was hit by the blue light and was transported to the edge of the Khumbu Icefall. He was hanging off the edge, holding on for his life, screaming for help. Ben heard his screams and looked toward the icefall to see Abaddon clinging to the icefall's edge. He pulled himself to his feet and ran to the icefall. He grabbed hold of Abaddon's hands. Abaddon looked below him and could not see the bottom; he begged Ben to save him. "Help me, please help me!"

Both men were now quite numb and their grips weakened. Ben fought his emotions; he could easily give Abaddon one swift kick and he'd be gone. He pushed the thought from his mind. He then tried to firm up his grip. Abaddon took hold of Ben's hand with both of his and pushed against the crevasse wall with his feet, attempting to pull Ben over the edge. Ben's body began sliding closer to the edge; he was hanging over it and feared he was about to go all the way over. Abaddon's hands slipped through Ben's; he fell down the crevasse, hitting several rock outcroppings as he fell, and disappeared into the depths below.

Ben fell back and lay in the snow, exhausted, in pain, and nearly frozen. He looked up at the clear sky above and said aloud, "Gotcha." He thought of Robert and figured he was about to join him; there was no way he could make it back to the Café alone.

General Morgan came running down the mountain. He had a snowsuit and put it on Ben, then turned on the warming feature of the suit. Ben immediately began to feel the relief of the heat

as it moved up and down the suit to warm his body. After a few minutes Morgan helped Ben stand and they began walking up the mountain toward the Café, Ben pressing on his broken rib.

Morgan said, “Abaddon?”

“We’ll have to send someone to retrieve the body. And the President?”

“Safe back at The White House.”

“What about the other virus attacks?”

“Abaddon’s operatives have been neutralized. It’s over.”

They reached the café. The hole in the transparent wall had been temporarily repaired; they entered through the “Climbers” door and made their way over and around restaurant debris as emergency personnel were evacuating the final few people remaining.

General Morgan brought Ben a hot coffee. “What now?”

Ben took a sip of his coffee, allowing the warm liquid to run down his throat. He pressed one hand on his ribs, which relieved some of the pressure and pain from the broken rib. He looked around at the mess that was once the popular café. People were still struggling with the cold, some had been cut by flying debris. A kid carrying a soccer ball he wouldn’t give up during the chaos was entering the trow pod. Emergency heaters were warming the café. Ben set down his coffee and a digital EMT wrapped Ben’s chest to begin the healing process, then Ben and General Morgan joined the emergency personnel to help them attend to the remaining patrons of the café.

Ben said, “I wonder if there are any openings with Special Forces.”

Morgan smiled and said, “For you the door is always open. You sure you want to come back to *this*?”

Ben looked around at all the people that needed his help. He felt a sense of calm he hadn’t felt in years. He helped a woman who was struggling to put on one of the emergency snowsuits. As he slid her arm inside the suit he turned to Morgan and said, “I think I know where I belong.”

Ben tied the shoelace of his boot, ensuring it was snug and regulation length. He then rolled the pant leg of his fatigues over the top of each boot and smoothed the edges of the plasztik fabric.

“Lt. Commander,” said General Morgan. Ben stood at attention and saluted the General. “Lt. Commander Barnett, I have your orders.” Ben liked being called Lt. Commander once again.

General Morgan’s persachip sent Ben his mission orders, which were instantly expressed to Ben. “Thank you, sir.”

“So,” General Morgan said with a grin, “they talked you into coming back.”

Ben checked his laser pistol, then placed it in his side holster. “Looks like.” Ben leaned into Morgan. “I think I did most of the talking.”

“When do you head out?”

“Tomorrow. It’s really just tying up a few loose ends. We’re going after Abaddon’s remaining subordinates.”

Most of Abaddon’s minions had been exposed in the weeks since the attacks; however, some were still working to overthrow the U.S.C.

“The mission is more of a mopping up than a seek and destroy. Still, it gives me the chance to get reacquainted with Special Forces and to get to know my unit. What about you?”

“We’re heading to L.A. to help coordinate the mini-quarantine. We should be able to keep the infection below 8,000.”

“Mini-quarantine...is that what they’re calling it?”

“They’re doing the same in St. Louis.”

Ben and Morgan exited the Pentagon locker room and headed for a break room. They approached a coffee mechanical.

Ben ordered first. “I’d like a coffee with cream.”

Morgan said, “The same.”

The digital brewed two cups of coffee, squirted cream in each cup, and handed them to Ben and Morgan.

“Thank you.”

They sat at a small table in the break room as Morgan continued, “They believe they can keep the St. Louis infections to under 700.”

“Thanks to you,” Ben said, using his coffee to toast the General.

General Morgan responded in kind and said, “Thanks to *us*.” Morgan looked at Ben, then said, “You seem different, somehow...contented?”

“I’m just glad to be back here. And this time I’m staying put.”

“Fereday’s loss...” Morgan said. Ben smiled. Then he thought of what it had cost him.

Ben’s persachip interrupted. “Excuse me, sir, but you are due in Key West in five minutes.”

“Key West?”

“Yeah, I want to see my folks. I’ll see you later.”

Ben stood, pulled out his portable trow device, and set it for *Betty’s Village Alzheimer’s Facility, Key West, Florida*. He then saluted the General and said, “Self-trow, execute.”

Ben disappeared. General Morgan raised his cup in salute.

Ben materialized at the side of the Alzheimer’s Facility, where he wouldn’t be seen. He still had to be careful about trowing with the portable device; he didn’t want to cause a stir by appearing out of nowhere. But he did cause quite a stir as he marched through the entrance lobby in his Special Forces uniform. One retired veteran saw Ben and shouted, “There’s one of our boys!” The women smiled and one woman sitting in a bamboo chair let out a little sigh.

Ben made his way to his parent’s apartment. When he reached the door it announced his presence to his parents. “Benjamin Barnett has arrived.”

The door opened and Ben saw his mother sitting in her usual place on the sofa. His father was already up and walking toward him. The room smelled of fresh jasmine flowers.

“Ben! Look at you!” Ben hugged his father, who took Ben by his shoulders and earnestly asked, “How are you doing? It must be tough...since...Robert.”

Ben stared at nothing in particular and said, “It is, Dad.”

“I’ve never experienced that kind of loss. I wish I knew what to say to you.”

Ben was always astonished at his father’s optimism. Others might say Zachary Barnett suffered just such a loss 24 years earlier and every day since. “I’m just so lucky to still have your mother with me.”

Ben looked at his mother, then said, “We both are.” He sat next to her on the sofa. He took her hand. Sherry turned her head to face him.

“Oh, hello.”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Do you know me?”

“You’re my mother...I’m your son.”

“How nice. “What is your name?”

“Benjamin.”

“Benjamin,” she repeated. “I knew a Benjamin, once. Nice boy. Did you bring those flowers?”

Ben looked to the jasmine flowers, then turned back to Sherry. “No, I think Dad brought you those flowers.”

“Who?”

Ben looked at Zachary, who was seated in the chair opposite the sofa. He cocked his head and smiled at Ben.

“Would you like me to bring you flowers, next time I visit?”

“Oh, that would be lovely. Are you leaving?”

“Not right now.”

“You’ll stay with me a while?”

“As long as I can.”

Sherry looked Ben in the eye and said, “Promise?”

Ben squeezed his mother’s hand, then leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

“I promise.”