

FROM THE TWISTED MIND OF KENNETH JAMES ALLEN

SYNCHRONICITY

THE IDENTITY COLLECTION



Want more twisted tales for free?



To say thanks for reading, I would like to give you a copy of **BROKEN**, a collection of flash fiction stories, for **FREE!**

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD¹](#)

Or visit <https://kennethjamesallen.com/free-book/>

Finally, don't forget to leave a review and follow me on **Facebook²**

Or visit <https://www.facebook.com/kennethjamesallenauthor>

1. <https://kennethjamesallen.com/free-book/>

2. <https://www.facebook.com/kennethjamesallenauthor>

More from Kenneth James Allen

INCH¹

The Steal Dossier

The Humanist²

The Isolationist (A Humanist Prequel)³

Identity Serial

Identity⁴

Reality⁵

Proximity⁶

Ferocity⁷

Mortality⁸

Finality⁹

-
1. <https://books2read.com/kja-inch>
 2. <https://books2read.com/kja-humanist>
 3. <https://books2read.com/kja-isolationist>
 4. <https://books2read.com/kja-identity>
 5. <https://books2read.com/kja-reality>
 6. <https://books2read.com/kja-proximity>
 7. <https://books2read.com/kja-ferocity>
 8. <https://books2read.com/kja-mortality>
 9. <https://books2read.com/kja-finality>

Caddis Finch Files
Machines¹⁰

Find out more at <https://kennethjamesallen.com/>

10. <https://books2read.com/kja-machines>

SYNCHRONICITY

KENNETH JAMES ALLEN



Published By Everington Publishing House, 2020

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

SYNCHRONICITY

First edition. December 2020.

Copyright © 2020 Kenneth James Allen.

Written by Kenneth James Allen.

“Synchronicity is an ever-present reality for those who have eyes to see.”

Carl Jung

“Yesterday they called it coincidence. Today it’s synchronicity. Tomorrow they’ll call it skill.”

Antero Alli

For those who are more

IDENTITY

“Our daydreams are the measure of our unreachable truth.”

Florianio Martins

“Sometimes we need fantasy to survive the reality.”

Mustafa Zahid

Prologue

Scott Harris wiped his hands on his pants. Like it did any good. There was too much blood and all it did was spread the mess. He jerked the headphone cable, and the buds popped out of his ears. Pulling the phone from his pocket, it slipped out of his hands and bounced on the carpet. He swore. It might have been because of the blood, or the fact he was shaking violently. Most likely both.

He picked the device off the floor and pressed the screen. Nothing. Fingers caked in red. It had seeped between the ridges of his fingerprint and hardened. Over the past few days, everything about him was unrecognizable. He wiped his hands again, this time on his shirt, and then the bed, and then the carpet. It seemed to do the trick because he could unlock the device and dial the number in his contacts.

Each unanswered dial tone was like the approaching footfalls of police coming to take him away. Every round seemed to get louder and louder. Sweat dripped down his face. His heart smacked against the inside of his chest like a cat trying to get out of a pillowcase. His mind was a scattered mess, but he had enough sense to make one call.

He couldn't take it anymore, at the end of his tether. He was about to throw the device against the wall when someone accepted his call.

"Jesus Christ, Scott. I told you not to call me anymore. Do you realize the danger you've put me in? Put us both in?"

"I... I didn't know who else to call."

"What's happened, Scott?"

"I... I don't know. I started the app before you could delete it. And now I'm here. And..."

"And what, Scott? What's happened?"

Scott looked down at the lifeless body at the center of a tornado of objects. Anything that wasn't bolted down was in a new location. The fluffy white nightgown now a dripping mess of red ferocity. A knife handle stood out of her chest, bounded by a pool of blood. He turned away to avoid adding bile to the scene and clenched his eyes shut.

"It's bad, Xavier. It's very bad. I think she's dead."

Silence.

"Get out of there, Scott? Do you hear me?"

"I can hear sirens."

There was silence, and then Xavier swore loudly. Several deep breaths seeped through the phone speaker. Eventually, he said, "Where are you?"

In the panic, he couldn't remember the name of the damn place. "I... I don't remember."

"Jesus Christ. I'll just track you myself. I will be there soon. Just don't touch anything. And don't say anything to anyone either."

No fear in that. Scott didn't want to be there, let alone touch anything. Plus, he didn't think he'd be able to string two words together to anyone else.

The call disconnected, leaving Scott with an eerie silence that a dead body in a small room can create. He lowered himself on the bed that squeaked under his weight.

He didn't want to look again.

Looked.

Shouldn't have looked.

"I'm so sorry, Samantha," he said, holding back tears. "So, so, sorry."

Sirens blared in the distance.

Chapter 1

Four days earlier

Scott stared at the swirling of the toilet bowl and once more upended his stomach's contents. Which wasn't much. This was the fourth time he couldn't restrain himself from vomiting, and each time he felt worse, not better. Chunky greens and oranges gave way to the clear variety, his stomach now entirely empty of anything except self-loathing.

He flushed and spat a few more times into the swirl, then closed his eyes and tried to compose himself. His gut muscles were tight after the carnage they produced, and Scott struggled to stand fully upright. He checked his watch and closed his eyes. His flight would board in ten minutes, and he didn't know whether he could make it until then.

Again, he hit the flusher, picked up his backpack, unlocked the cubicle door and shuffled out towards the washbasins. An overhead fluorescent blinked repeatedly as passengers rushed by him, from urinals and stalls to soap and sinks. Faces were a blur. He grabbed hold of the sink to stop his vision spinning like he was on an out-of-control merry-go-round.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror. Lifeless, bloodshot eyes stared back at him. Everything he had ever read, heard and seen about his affliction, ordered itself in his mind and he mentally ticked off the items. He took a deep breath, held it for a second and slowly released. He washed out his mouth, splashed water on his face. Nothing helped. It was all a crock of shit.

He was inspecting his blue sports coat and beige polo shirt for deflected disgorge when a flush erupted from one of the stalls. The door kicked open, and a man marched to the sink. Scott watched as he washed his hands and inspected himself in the mirror. He brushed down his dark charcoal three-piece suit and ran a hand through a mop of chestnut hair. He turned.

“Is everything alright?”

Scott shook his head, made a look on his face like he was trying to remember something that had just come to him.

“Sorry? Yes. Of course. I was just...” and then he trailed off, mumbling the last few words. Not even *he* knew what he was talking about.

“It’s just that I heard you before. It didn’t sound like you were okay.”

Scott looked down at his cracked black leather shoes. He could feel his face get hot. “Oh, ah, it’s just that I’m not a great flyer.”

“Quite normal, nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Nerves,” Scott said. “I never used to be this way, it’s just that—.”

“Just flying?”

“Just about anything,” Scott replied.

An announcement donned the airwaves. Scott’s flight was boarding. Just the thought of it had him bowing his head to the sink. He retched three times, each attempt placing more strain on his gut muscles. He could feel the six-pack under his layer of fat getting a workout. Nothing came up. There was nothing to come up.

He turned to find his companion standing there, inspecting him, looking over him like we would a new sports car, deciding whether to invest time and money into it. In the end, his guest clicked his fingers.

“You know what? I have something that could help you.”

“Is it a gun to blow my brains out?”

“Calm down. First of all, my name is Xavier Cane.” He produced a business card and handed it over. Scott took it. It was matt black, with simple white embossed lettering. On the front were his name and cell number in a font that was so pleasing to the eye that Scott just wanted to read it over and over. It was heavier than the business cards Scott was used to receiving.

“And you are?”

Scott looked up to see Xavier with his hand out. They shook hands.

“Oh, I’m, um, I’m Scott Harris.”

Xavier folded his arms and leaned against the sink. “And what is it that you do, Scott?”

The card held Scott’s attention, and he jerked his head up when he heard his name. “Um, sales. I’m in sales.”

“Ah, very good. And what do you sell?”

Scott pocketed the business card, more so to stop it being a distraction. He replied. Faintly.

“Sorry?” Xavier inquired, leaning forward.

“Stationery. I’m in stationery.”

Xavier pursed his lips.

Scott couldn’t tell if he was stifling a laugh or paused for concern. It wasn’t different from the reactions he usually received. In fact, at parties, his wife often suggested he pick another occupation, *any* other occupation, to align himself to. He usually just kept to himself anyway, taking a seat in the corner while the other guests joked and laughed and gently placed hands on each other’s shoulders.

“Trust you have a business card then? Someone in your line of work must have one.”

Scott shrugged, pushed his hands inside his pockets. “Actually, the boss said with budget cuts that I can’t have any. Oh, but it’s just temporary. Until I can make that huge sale. Then the sky’s the limit.”

Scott's face dropped. His mind whirred. "Oh, God. I'm going to miss my flight." He leaned over the sink again.

"Listen," Xavier said. "Just shout out your number. I will send you something that will help."

Scott didn't hesitate to yell out the numbers. He would try anything. A moment later, his phone buzzed.

"Come on," Xavier said. "I'll walk you to your gate."

Xavier parted seas of people as they strode the terminal. In fact, people made a special effort to allow him to reach his destination unimpeded. Long queues of people would break in half, groups of nattering people would disperse. All the while, Scott skipped along to keep up, feeling like the proverbial puppy being led by his master. He investigated the new application that had appeared on his device.

"What the hell is *Identity*?" he asked.

Xavier smiled and thrust a hand into his pocket like a runway model. "Scott, have you ever wanted something more?"

"What do you mean?"

"From life. Are you satisfied?"

Scott laughed. "Is that a trick question? Of course I'm not satisfied. I mean, look at me. I'm a forty-five-year-old man going to a stationary exhibition who can't control his nerves."

"You really need to see yourself differently. Identity will help see yourself in a whole new way. It will help you realize you've got more control than you think you do. You are more than you think you are."

"What is it? Guided meditation?"

Xavier chortled. "No! It's how I got to be where I am today. Believe it or not, Scott, I was once just like you. My wife had left me. My friends wouldn't talk to me. I hated my job and my life. Let the world walk all over me. Had really low self-confidence. Even attempted suicide a few times."

“Shit!”

“Yes. And then I found this. Trust me. Get on the plane, put in some headphones, and let the app do everything else. Believe me, you’ll love it. I just have one request of you.”

“Sure, what is it?”

Xavier mulled it over. “Nah. You know what, just enjoy it. The first time is always the best. Just call me when you reach your destination. Where are you headed?”

“East.”

“Client?”

“Exhibition.”

“There’s an exhibition for stationery?”

“You’d be surprised. I mean, it’s not all blue pens and recycled paper. The Japanese are doing some amazing things in this territory.”

“So, your boss can’t afford business cards but can send you to the exhibition?”

“The company gets a discount if we go. Not that we pass that discount onto our customers.”

Xavier didn’t respond, so Scott kept his mouth shut. This is what his wife was talking about. No one enjoys talking about what he does. He brings down the entire mood of the party.

Comfortable silence ensued.

“So, what exactly does the app do?” Scott said, making polite conversation.

“That’s a little hard to explain. It affects different people in various ways. The only true way to know is to try it out. What have you got to lose?”

“Yeah,” Scott said defiantly. “What *have* I got to lose?”

It turns out, everything.

Chapter 2

Scott stood in the aisle and looked at his seat. The man against the window was huge. His jeans and tight black shirt did little to stop the massive gut from almost touching the seat in front. His fat arm hung lazily at his side, resting on the currently empty middle seat. His head was back, mouth agape, breathing awkwardly. Waiting for his heart attack.

A woman spilled out into every available space from the aisle position. Her loose-fitting top made her look like a melting scoop of ice cream. Her long straggly brown mop framed chub and chins.

The longer he looked, the more he was sure he was having a stroke. He rotated his glance from the seat to the ticket, then to the overhead identifier. Something was wrong. Surely someone had made a mistake. He didn't care who; the person who booked the ticket. The person who issued the ticket. The printer for printing the ticket.

A tap on his shoulder. "Excuse me, sir. We require all passengers to take their seats now." Her voice had a school teacher edge to it.

"Oh, it's just that—"

"It's a full flight today," she said. "So, your bag will have to go under the seat in front." Tone intensified, like this was the last flight of the day, and she was in no mood to deal with a problem passenger.

"I get that. It's just that—"

"Is there a problem here?"

The question originated from his other side, a male flight attendant closing ranks on him. Chest broad. Scott could feel it against him. But he dared not make eye contact—that would suggest confrontation. And he didn't want any hostile interactions. So he said nothing.

“Sir,” she said again. “You need to take your seat.”

There was a lot Scott could have said at that moment, a hundred reasons why he couldn't just take his seat yet chose to voice none of it. The last thing he wanted was for someone to record a scene on their phone and post it to social media for the world to see. So, he merely nodded and accepted his fate.

The large woman sighed heavily when she hauled herself out of her crevice, placing sufficient downforce to leverage her weight that she almost broke the seat in front. With backpack clutched to his chest, Scott eased down into his confines.

He felt hot again, stuffy. As the other bookend took her seat, Scott's world closed in around him. His traveling companions' legs and arms rubbed against him. There was no escape now. Couldn't move, couldn't breathe. It was going to be the world's longest flight. If there was an emergency to get off the plane, he most certainly would die. And at that moment, he was happy with that.

Might as well kill me now and beat them to it.

The safety briefing began, and Scott figured there was no point in listening to it. So, he removed his phone from his breast pocket and looked at the screen. The *Identity* application emblem—a fingerprint in the shape of a brain—looked back at him. It pulsed like it was alive, unlike any of the other applications he had on the phone. It instantly calmed him, drew him in, arrested his attention.

He unzipped the front pocket of his backpack, retrieved his headphones, fought with the mess as he untangled the cord, then plugged in the other end to the device. Finger hovered over the application. He remembered what Xavier had told him, that the first time is always the best time. Took a deep breath, clicked the button, and immediately passed out.

“Excuse me, sir. Your champagne.”

The words didn't sound right. Perhaps an interaction from business class was being broadcast over the intercom. So, he ignored it.

"Sir?" A hand on his shoulder gently rocked him.

Scott hoped he had somehow slept the entire journey, and the flight attendant was rousing him from his slumber as the plane sat at the arrival gate. He felt strangely light, lacking any anxiousness or worry. His heart softly pulsed along at resting rate. He wore comfort like pajamas. Couldn't remember the last time he felt that way, if ever. He also couldn't feel the body heat of the two meat sacks flanking him.

He slowly opened his eyes. Light dazzled, his viewpoint glittering until it settled into his conscious. He gasped, looked around with wide eyes. Found it difficult to rationalize his surroundings.

A man stood at his side, holding a tray carrying a glass of champagne. He wore a sleek, dark suit and black bow tie. His brown eyes held a level of mystique Scott couldn't fathom, and it took a lot of willpower to tear himself away from the gaze.

In front of him was a big screen inset into a polished wooden wall. To his right a duplicate single leather chair. He peered around towards the rear of the aircraft. More chairs, a sofa along one edge. All the blinds over the windows were closed.

At the back of the fuselage, a lady in a red bowtie and crisp white shirt stood behind a bar and mixed a cocktail. Her short blond hair bobbed up and down as she took charge of the shaker. The contents rattled around. She smiled as they made eye contact. Scott blushed and spun back to the front.

"Is everything okay, sir?" the attendant at his side asked. "Anything I can get you?"

Scott failed to find his voice. Was this the application? Had it sent him into a dreamlike state? Perhaps this was all a hallucination, and the beverage wielding attendant was really the airline attendant

offering him peanuts. Or he was dead. The plane had crashed and the passengers on either side had crushed him upon impact.

“Where am I?” Scott inquired as if he had just woken from a decade long coma. “Who are you?”

“Your private jet, sir. As always.”

“My private jet?” Scott said.

“And apologies for not introducing myself. My name is Woodward. Your personal assistant for this journey. I’m responsible for making sure you have everything you need.”

“But... How... Where...”

“May I recommend starting with the champagne, sir, and then Maxine at the bar will whip you up an old fashioned. The best you’ve ever had.”

Scott reached for the flute before he knew what he was doing. He was being drawn into the world and he was powerless to stop it. Then he noticed it. He was no longer wearing his tattered blue sports coat. Instead, he donned a navy-blue woolen suit. Black and silver cufflinks held his stiff, white sleeves together. The silver rim of a watch peeked from under it. He owned none of these things yet admired them on others.

He took the glass. “Old fashioned?” Scott questioned. “Haven’t had one of those in quite a while.”

“Quite right, sir,” Woodward remarked.

“How long until we land?”

“Let me just check with the captain.”

He smiled, nodded, and approached the front of the aircraft. He knocked twice on the wood panel and a section of the wall swung in. With a final glance over his shoulder, he dissolved into the darkness, the panel sealing shut.

Maxine arrived at his side as Scott swallowed the remnants of his champagne.

“Allow me to take that, sir,” she said, gripping the crystal flute. Her voice was innocent yet sultry. Scott felt the strange concoction of attraction and shame as he gazed into her bright blue eyes. He noted his wedding ring was as absent as his concern for infidelity.

“It’s okay, sir,” she said. “I understand.”

Maxine held out her hand and Scott took it. She led him towards the rear of the plane where a drink was waiting on the bar, swiveling a chair so it faced the bar. For the five steps, he tried not to focus on her round ass in the tight black pants. Then she turned. Stood unprofessionally close to him. Pushed him down into the plush leather.

“You need to get comfortable, Mr. Harris. This next part will get a little... bumpy.”

She winked and turned around to the bar. When she turned back with a heavy glass in her hand, a hypnotic baseline and thumping backbeat poured out of the speaker system. She handed the drink over. Lust surged from her eyes. Then she started to sway her hips.

Scott’s eyes fell into line with her movements, entirely mesmerized by the show as he sipped his drink. The alcohol generated warmth over his entire being. Each swallow dragged him deeper. He shouldn’t watch but just couldn’t tear himself away.

Maxine ran hands over her body. Fingers across her lips. Between groans of sensual agony, she locked eyes with the passenger. She circled her prey, softly dragging her hand across his shoulders, face, and legs. In prime position, she pulled off the bowtie and slowly unbuttoned her shirt. When completed, she just let it hang, keeping her breasts a secret on the verge of discovery. She stalked towards him, straddled, deliberately easing onto his lap and jumping up again.

Scott stared and drank. She had awoken so many things within him he thought to be extinct, yet now knew they were only dormant, waiting for the right person to come along. He reached out, tenderly placing a hand on her sternum. Felt the lace brassiere under his

grasp. She playfully groaned with each movement. He drank for every groan.

He opened the curtain to reveal the stars of the show, her ample bosom aching for him to release them. All the while she gyrated on his lap, swayed her perfect hips to the flawless beat.

“I want you,” he whispered.

“Say it louder, Scott,” she groaned.

“I said I want you,” he said, a little louder, his body undertaking too many simultaneous activities that he seemed almost put out with having to repeat it.

“Louder. Say it like a man.”

“I want you!” he screamed.

She grasped his hands, intertwined fingers as she continued to writhe over his body, immersed in the composition. Took him with her.

Then a thud. The music came to a natural ending, the outro diminishing into silence. Maxine stood, long blinks, satisfaction oozing from her.

“Thank you, Mr. Harris.” She buttoned her top. “We trust you’ve had an excellent flight today.”

Scott didn’t know if he was fulfilled or not, or if she was entirely satisfied, regardless of her words. She spun the chair, so he was facing the front of the jet, where he noted Woodward standing guard. Scott wasn’t sure how long he had been there or how much he had seen. He did, however, nod approvingly.

“We’ve arrived,” Woodward announced. “We have a short taxi to the pickup and then they’ll bring your car up. They’re eager to meet you.”

“My car?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Wait! Who wants to meet me?”

Chapter 3

Scott stood at the top of the stairs and looked out. Several black SUVs had descended on the private transporter. Between them, men and women in dark suits and sunglasses stood stoically, the wind wiping through them, tussling hair and billowing suit jackets. Amongst the black and gray and charcoal, a red, Mustang convertible sat idling, the pile shaking in anticipation of being driven. The latest model, gleaming paintwork, top down. The trunk lid was up, and several suited people were loading large containers into the compartment.

Still coming to terms with everything, Scott descended the stairs. He decided he was dreaming, regardless of the realism of it all. He had willed himself a few times to wake up, to no avail. So, what the hell. When his feet hit the tarmac, one of the suits took off his sunglasses and approached. He had white hair and a nondescript face with features you couldn't describe to a sketch artist. He threw his hand out.

“Mr. Harris, so glad you could make it. My name is Special Agent Tom Rollinson.”

They shook, and he escorted Scott to the car, talking as he did so, over the winding down of the jet engines.

“Our intelligence suggests Dimitrijevic will be at the club at nine. You just need to make the sale.”

They reached the back of the vehicle.

“What am I supposed to sell him?” Scott asked Rollinson with interest. He didn't feel any unease with the thought of selling something to someone named Dimitrijevic in a club late at night. In fact, it all sounded quite straightforward, like he did it every day.

Rollinson reached inside the trunk, popped the lid of one container and stood back.

“Barrett M95 bolt-action sniper rifles. Courtesy of the U. S government.”

For some reason, it still seemed like a good idea.

“In all of those cases?” Scott asked.

“We also have night vision goggles and a whole lot of M67 hand grenades. Everything Dimitrijevic could want for his little war with Croatia.”

“Well,” Scott said. “It all seems very straight forward.”

They shook hands again. “Oh, just one thing. Dimitrijevic is extremely paranoid. He won’t do business with just anyone. You’ll need to go deep cover if you want to win this guy over.”

“I get it.”

Rollinson squared him up, stared deep into his eyes. “Do you? Mr. Harris, you will need to prove yourself to him, to show he can trust you. Whatever he asks you to do, you must do it. Do you understand?”

Scott nodded.

“Now,” Rollinson continued. “Don’t forget, if this all goes wrong, you’ll be on your own. For reasons I’m sure you can understand, this mission can no longer officially involve our agency.”

He set his sunglasses back on his face.

“You’re all we’ve got. The success of this mission is entirely up to you.”

He then made a signal with his hands. Agents from across the tarmac simultaneously boarded their nearest SUV and disappeared.

Scott stared at the red Mustang amongst the feeling black vehicles, a splash of color on a dull backdrop. Maxine leaned against the bonnet; her arms crossed, her eyes inviting, her smile alluring. Woodward held the passenger side door open. Broad shoulders back.

“Right this way, sir,” Woodward called out.

Scott looked at the car longingly as he advanced.

“If it’s all the same to you, Woodward, I’d rather do the driving.”

“Very good, sir.” He nodded and eased the door closed. “Maxine and I will take alternative transport and meet you at the hotel.”

“Sounds good,” Scott said. “And what hotel is it?”

“It’s plugged into the GPS for you, sir. Enjoy your journey.”

Scott tore along the highway, swerving between cars like they were stationary. He shifted up and down, through the cycle of gears as often as he could, obtaining great delight in seeing the digital tachometer burst around the dial. And the car seemed to love every moment. Speed seemed inconsequential, road rules merely guidelines as he swerved and veered around every obstacle.

Every traffic light was orange, enticing him to fly through before the red signal. Every intersection was an opportunity to drift. He checked the touchscreen a few times, however, the car seemed to know where he was going. And he was getting there in excellent time.

He rounded the fountain and came to a screeching halt under the awning, narrowly avoiding the parked luxury sportscars. A majestic entrance, the stone structure sprawled across his vision. The frontage comprised manicured bushes and French balconies. A flag atop a central pole bustled in the wind.

A valet rushed over to open the driver’s side door. Scott sat there, soaking in the moments, redlining the tachometer with unspeakable delight. He gripped the steering wheel, stared out the windscreen, and beamed as if he had just won the lottery for the third time that week.

He pulled himself out of the car.

“Take good care of my baby.”

“What?” the young man replied.

Scott looked back to the car. Patted the hood. Something was wrong. Very wrong. He ducked inside the interior, then stepped away. His *baby* had transformed itself into a Taurus. The resort he pulled up to was now a two-story motor inn. He sighed when he noticed his tatty blue sports coat and cracked shoes had returned.

He heard a noise behind him and realized he still had his headphones in. He pulled them out and stuffed his device and ear ware into his pocket. Turned to see a woman, mid-fifties, red hair tied into a messy bun, smoking a cigarette. Deep creases all over her face looked like the topography of a mountain range.

“Sorry,” Scott said. “Were you talking to me?”

“Yes, you imbecile! Don’t sit in the entryway and rev your god damn engine. What sort of neighborhood do you think this is?”

Scott took in his surroundings, which wasn’t much to look at. A homeless man shuffled along the footpath beside the main drag, coming to rest at a bus stop. Boarded-up houses and businesses in either direction looked derelict; someone with nothing better to do plastered graffiti across their facades. A rusted tricycle sat in a front yard amongst tall grass that threaded through a chain-link fence. An SUV with black tinted windows crawled up the street.

“Are you stupid or something?” she continued.

“N—No,” he stammered.

“You checking in?” she said gruffly. Sounded like she had been smoking since birth.

“Y—Yes.”

“Well get inside here and I’ll check you in.”

He started to follow the old bag, then stopped. He marched to the back of the vehicle and popped the trunk. The only thing in the recess was his powder-blue suitcase. He bought it because he thought the color was relaxing. Then he immediately regretted it. The shop-

keeper refused to offer an exchange or refund, even though he hadn't even touched it after the sale was complete. Scott didn't want to argue, so he wheeled it out of the store with an itchy neck and short breaths.

The foyer looked like he had time-traveled back three decades ago. The green, orange, and pink carpet were threadbare, yet somehow spongy underfoot. Mildew grew against the walls, where mold took over and climbed the walls. There was furniture present, yet he wasn't game to touch anything. In fact, he loathed to breathe in the potentially toxic fumes. No wonder the old bat wanted to smoke. Helped to mask the moist air.

Once again, surely, someone had made a mistake. The company personal assistant, someone in the conference team, even the online travel agent. One of them has made a mistake and booked the cheapest possible dump they found on the web. When images of the room came to him, he started having heart palpitations. The bus stop on the curb seemed like a better option than what was potentially upstairs.

With suitcase in hand, Scott kicked the door to his room open. Even though it was adjacent to the backside of the lift well, he had to pass thirteen other rooms to get to it. He dragged his suitcase inside (one wheel had locked up and the other was cracked), looked at the surroundings, and sighed.

The corner lamp and bedside lights—the only working lights—emitted a sickly yellow glow on the room. It smelled as though something had crawled into a hidden crevice and died. The furnishings mirrored that of the foyer—dated, decrepit, dirty. A lumpy mattress against the vibrating wall so he could feel every movement of the lift. Above the bed was a crappy oil painting that would offend ninety-nine percent of the population in a heavy, gild-

ed frame, that if it fell, would certainly decapitate him. He approached some heavy curtains and drew them back, keen to find some fresh air that could save him from the putrid wet, dead animal smell. Alas, what he found was a plain brick wall that was damp to the touch.

Just the thought of staying in the room another second longer induced sweat to appear on his forehead. Cheeks were hot. Arms were itchy. He should complain. No, request a better room. Wait. Better than that. He should get in his car and drive. Fast. To the nearest five-star hotel he could find. He wouldn't even bother looking back in the rear-view mirror... But who was he to take such action? He was a nobody. No one. Weak. Pitiful. A speck on the human landscape.

Scott screwed his nose up as he inspected the rest of the furniture. An old television box with rabbit ear antenna. A minibar fridge, the inside of which was hotter than the room. A shower bath accompanied with rust rings and an incessant drip. It's funny. Being an incessant drip is something his wife said about him to her friends.

His phone rang. An unknown number.

Chapter 4

Scott answered with uncertainty. Hoping it was Maxine, knowing it wouldn't be.

“Mr. Harris! Did you forget to call me?”

Scott settled down on the bed. It complained loudly. He could feel every rotted spring.

“Huh? Who is this?”

A conscious sigh. “Xavier. Titan. Cain. We met at the airport? The app? I introduced you to the *Identity* app?”

“Ah, yes,” Scott replied, forgetting all about his room predicament. “Oh my god. It was amazing. I was on this private jet. And there was this girl there. Oh my, Xavier. This girl. And, oh my, I drove this mustang. And boy did I drive it.”

“Well, it certainly sounds like an adventure. Trust no anxiety issues, then? Problem solved?”

Scott looked around again, sensations of a moving elevator rumbled through the bedding and into his limbs. Shook away memories of the plane and the car and the girl. “There was this weird part where I was part of some shady government arms deal. Not sure what that's about.”

Silence.

“You there, Xavier?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry. I think the line dropped out. The experience is different for everyone. It latches into the subconscious and draws on suppressed intentions.”

“Suppressed *what*?”

“Fantasies, Mr. Harris. All those things you wish you could do. It lures them into the conscious for you to play out. Believe me, I have heard just about everything. And I do mean everything. Unfor-

tunately, I can't help you with the content of your fantasies, however, please know they are completely harmless. They are there for your enjoyment, nothing more."

"Can't wait for my next hit then," Scott said with a snicker.

"It's not a toy, Mr. Harris. Best to use it sparingly. For those times when you most definitely need to use it, when there is no other choice. It's for dire circumstance, not to gain confidence to pick up women. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," Scott replied absentmindedly, his attention on the cracked and peeling wallpaper near the door. It looked like someone had tried to claw their way out of the room. Maybe he would do the same.

"You don't sound very convincing, Mr. Harris."

"Yes," Scott replied. "I've got it."

"And if there is anything more about shady government dealings, best you contact me immediately. Agreed?"

Scott wasn't sure why Xavier was placing so much emphasis on it, so he shrugged and accepted the terms of the arrangement.

"Very good. Now, what will be keeping you busy this evening?"

"Exhibition dinner. We're supposed to attend, but I'm thinking I will skip."

"You will do no such thing. You must attend. You can't run away from yourself forever. Eventually you must face these things. Surely your experience on your flight will have renewed your self-confidence. Best you build on this immediately."

The call ended and Scott lugged the suitcase onto the mattress. The whole bed shifted under the new weight. He opened the lid and stared at the contents. Uninspired. He chose a pink (he would've liked to call it aggressive salmon), short-sleeve shirt his wife purchased for him some months prior. He more than hated it. However, it didn't need ironing, which was helpful, as the room had no iron. He figured if he kept his blue sports coat on all night, hardly anyone

would notice. He doused himself in deodorant spray (the old shower in a can) because he couldn't face the shower in the room. Surely, he could go two days without a shower.

He reviewed his choices in the mirror. When he released his breath, his shoulders hunched forward, and head dropped. He thought about the strangers he would interact with at the dinner. Closed his eyes. Deep breaths. Kept counting. Thought of something else. Anything else. Maxine. Thought of her. *Oh my*. What was he going to tell his wife? Would she even care?

The Uber dropped him off at the exhibition hall where the dinner was to take place. It was cheaper than a taxi, and he knew his boss would probably screw him on the deduction. Stood on the sidewalk in front of a mountain of stairs. Men arrived in rented sports cars and sported expensive suits, taking the steps two at a time, eager to impress. Ladies arrived donning professional pantsuits or cocktail dresses. Some had partners. None as fetching as Maxine.

Pressure starting to build in his chest. Yes, a heart attack. If an ambulance came to take him to the nearest hospital, he wouldn't have to go to the dinner. He could sit the rest of the exhibition out. They would understand, still give the company its discount. Could go home early. Short breaths, shaking hands, nausea consumed him. Wished for the pavement to open and swallow him. Was almost on one knee.

Pulled out the headphones. Thrust them in with sweaty hands. Found the application. Pressed the button.

A musclebound bouncer in a shirt two sizes too small opened the double doors, allowing Scott to walk in. The unrestricted bass thumped his eardrums. The hypnotic beat drowned out his insecur-

rities. Lasers attacked every surface in time to the music. Dressed in a white suit, matching loafers and reflective sunglasses, Scott danced between shadow and light. Throngs of gyrating, sweaty bodies dispersed as he approached, moving around him like water flowing over a stone.

He emerged from the crowd flanked by two people, arms around each other, keeping time with the beat. Maxine on his right wore a short black dress with a split that went to her waist, and heels that accentuated her calves. On his left, Woodward wore a navy-blue suit, thin black tie, and polished black shoes.

Several large men assembled as the trio approached the VIP area. One of the security guards approached the rope barricade and folded his arms. The two groups eyed each other off. Scott looked past him to the man on the couch.

Dimitrijevic lounged back, his arms up on the back of the couch, his dark shirt unbuttoned just one more than it should be. Gold chains highlighted the area, matched by his large, gold wire-framed glasses. He made eye contact with Scott and he stopped bopping his head to the music. A guard leaned down and whispered to him. Dimitrijevic rubbed the growth on his chin, his eyes searching his guest.

Scott removed his sunglasses, eased them into his jacket pocket, and nodded to the contact. The security guard, having received instruction through his earpiece, bowed his head and unlinked the rope, allowing the trio to enter the restricted area. Dimitrijevic stood as they drew closer.

He looked like he dealt in soft-core porn, not weapons. But then again, Scott didn't think *he* looked like a spy. He remembered the words from Special Agent Rollinson: *You're all we've got. The success of this mission is entirely up to you.*

Scott held out his hand, however Dimitrijevic ignored the offer and sat. Undeterred, the trio sat.

Dimitrijevic leaned forward, elbows on knees. "I understand you have something for me," he said, his accent mixed and muddled, yet clearly understood. It was like the music paused when he spoke.

Scott smiled. "More than you could possibly want."

Dimitrijevic rubbed his chin. "I see. And who do we have here?"

Scott introduced his counterparts and Dimitrijevic seemed to drink in their presence. He leaned back and inspected the two, studied them with his eyes, taking in Maxine's exposed thigh and Woodward's impressive physique. The smirk on his face articulated his thoughts clearly.

Eventually, he shook a finger at Scott. "You know what? I like you." He slapped his knees. "Let's do this. You have my order with you?"

Scott nodded. "In the alley out back."

"Now, this is a beautiful car," Dimitrijevic said.

"Four hundred and sixty horses," Scott detailed.

Dimitrijevic ran a finger along the side of the car, rounded it like it was in a showroom.

"Tell you what," Scott said. "You like it so much; take it."

Dimitrijevic stood back, clutched his hands over his heart, a shocked look on his face. "What? You'd do that? For me?"

"Of course," Scott said. "Save's you having to move the package, right?"

"This is all very generous of you." Then his attention turned from the vehicle to the Maxine and Woodward standing either side of Scott.

"Perhaps you would care to sweeten the deal further?"

Scott looked over them, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, Dimitrijevic, but some things aren't for sale."

He approached Scott with bedroom eyes. Pursed lips. Leveled stare. Put an arm over Scott's shoulder and grabbed the back of his neck. Pointed to his chest.

"You are a lucky man. And on top of that, you have principles. I like that... I like that a lot. Tell you what I'm going to do. If you are going to give me this wonderful gift, I will give you something."

"Really, Dimitrijevic, there is no need."

"No. Please. It is important for me you accept this gift without hesitation."

Scott shrugged. "Of course, of course. What is it?"

Dimitrijevic stood back, pulled a gun from the back of his pants, pointed it. Scott held his breath. Hard stares. Then Dimitrijevic relinquished. Eased his grip, turned the weapon, so the handle faced Scott, who reluctantly took it.

"A gun?"

"Yes. Come with me."

Scott followed Dimitrijevic to the back of a dark blue Mercedes SUV. It looked like a tank. The back door opened. Scott's eyes grew. Crumpled into a fetal position on a piece of white plastic, with hands and feet bound, was Special Agent Rollinson.

"What the hell do you want me to do?" Scott asked, turning to Dimitrijevic.

"Finding someone to trust is very hard these days. It seems like everyone is out for themselves. Hidden agendas. Shadow games. So, I need to know if I can trust you."

Scott looked down at the agent who returned a resigned gaze. Rollinson's words echoed in his ears. *You will need to prove yourself to him, to show he can trust you. Whatever he asks you to do, you must do it.*

"If you kill him," Dimitrijevic said, "we have a deal."

Someone placed a gun at the back of Scott's head. He wasn't sure who was holding it.

“If you don’t, I kill you. The choice is yours.”

Scott’s mind went blank. “Now, Dimitrijevic, I think we should talk about this.”

“Three.”

“This is ridiculous. This is no way to commence our relationship.”

“Two.”

Scott pointed the gun at the agent. Rollinson shut his eyes. So did Scott.

“One.”

Gun fired.

Cool froth erupted out of the bottle like a geyser. People were on their feet, jostling against each other with hands in the air trying to catch the liquid as if it was a thrown wedding bouquet. The horde chanted his name repeatedly. Scott viewed the writhing mass from his vantage point on top of the table. He stood amongst dirty plates, half-drunk wine glasses, and cheaply purchased table decorations.

The room was a buzz, and it seems he had created it. However, he didn’t truly appreciate the cacophony until he removed his headphones. People danced and writhed to elevator music, a generic tune with not much beat or seismic rhythm. They cheered wildly, demanding more. A man in his fifties wearing a suit to match his gray-ing hair approached the table and reached out for the bottle. Scott handed it over and the man drank from the bottle amongst a posse of adoring fans.

It was then he noticed how fast his heart was racing. The mental stimulation, or whatever the Identify app offered, had produced something startling. The whole thing had started innocently enough. The private jet, the secret agent type mission, the red Mustang. But then things had taken a sinister route. He had to kill someone. Did

he pull the trigger? There was a gunshot, certainly enough. It still rang in his ears, the echo playing havoc with his surroundings. Is this what it was supposed to be like?

Xavier told him to make contact if there was anything more about “*shady government dealings*”. But if he did, he would have to admit he used *Identity* again after he was told to use in only the direst of situations. It just so happened that Scott faced those types of situations more than most. Maybe it was all over. The arms deal. Dimitrijevic. The agent tied up in the boot. Perhaps whatever part of his consciousness that scenario came from was now satisfied.

He promised himself it was the last time, that he would try any hundred other techniques before he resorted to the app.

Then a hand came down on Scott’s shoulder, and he shirked under the surprise.

Chapter 5

“A hell of a thing you did here tonight,” she said.

Scott turned to view his visitor. Brunette. Blue eyes that sparkled. He could feel his knees weaken, his throat tighten. Words with no way out.

“Can’t believe you were so reluctant to pop that damn champagne!” she continued. “You certainly know how to keep people on a leash! You’re such a tease!”

They looked at each other in silence.

“Scott, right?”

He slowly nodded, furrowed his brow.

“Sorry, you don’t remember me. My name is Veronica, we met briefly last year? I tried to talk to you in the foyer, but it seemed like you were in a hurry to leave. I recall you didn’t look so well.”

“Oh,” Scott said, his brow furrowed. “Maybe it was something I ate?”

“But for some reason I remember you.” She turned side-on, inspected him closely. “But you seem different. So very intoxicatingly strange.”

They stood on the table and watched the masses contorting themselves to an invisible beat.

“Don’t know how you did it, Scott,” she said. “The bunch of boring fuckers are really getting into it.”

“To be honest, I’m not sure exactly what I did.”

“Too modest, Scott,” she said with a laugh and a light touch on his arm. Electricity. “You are a good guy.”

Shit. Was he? His wife never called him a good guy or anything for that matter. She much preferred vilifying adjectives in place of nouns or pronouns.

“Listen,” she said, offering her hand, and guiding him down from the table. She led him to a corner of the room, a blind spot from the stridency. “I’m impressed with what you’ve been able to do here tonight. To get these people to follow you, for them to soak up whatever you threw at them, is an amazing quality.”

Scott still wasn’t sure exactly what he did.

“Which is why,” she continued, “I want you to come and work for me. Global head of sales.” She stepped forward. “Big salary.” Another step. “Company car. Business class flights.” Another step, if that were possible. She ran her hands up and down his lapels. “And some... shall we say... company perks.” She thrust her lips up towards his, and before Scott could figure out what was happening her tongue was in his mouth, one of her hands squeezing his ass.

Scott pushed her away. Reflex more than anything. Fright or flight.

“I’m sorry, Veronica.” He held up his hand and pointed to his ring.

“Oh, I don’t mind that,” she said, her eyes half-closed. “I just can’t resist such self-assurance. Such... poise!”

Scott checked his ears. Were the buds in the canal? Had he accidentally started the app? Was he dreaming? This was all too absurd, that an alluring woman could offer him such a glamorous position with her company.

She reached down and grabbed his crotch. Scott gasped. Although she didn’t squeeze, just held it.

“Think about my offer, Scott. I’ll send you an email with details. I hope you accept it.”

And then she disappeared, morphed back into the crowd.

Scott slowly released his breath.

Then he found himself outside, standing on the front steps. He blinked. How the hell had he gotten outside? Things seemed to be moving fast. Too fast. Much too fast. Breathing intensified. Things

were happening, and he was falling out of control before he could anchor himself in the present.

Then he was on the street.

Then a taxi.

Then standing in the middle of an alleyway. He fell to the damp bitumen. On his hands and knees, he could feel water soaking his pants. Vomited. Loudly. There was no other way it was coming up. It swirled in a puddle and he averted his eyes to avoid a repeat performance. Pounding in his chest. Shallow breaths. Body shook. Fingers numb. Dark thoughts. He was powerless to stop the spread of panic invading his body. He apologized profusely to himself, repeating “sorry”, as he struggled to push the buds into his ears.

Footsteps coming towards him. A pair of shoes coming into view.

“Here,” the man said, his voice accented. “Let me help you up.”

The man heaved Scott to his feet, then he was off the ground. Flying backwards. His body crunched against a brick wall. Air knocked out of his lungs. A hand around his throat.

“Do you think Dimitrijevic enjoys playing games?”

Before Scott could fathom his predicament and answer the question, a fist hammered into his stomach, ripping out whatever oxygen he had sucked into his lungs. He dropped to the ground, trying to breathe, squirming like a newborn calf. Through the mayhem he had the sound mind to pull at his ears, ever hopeful this was all some sick imaginary world he had been harboring deep in his subconscious.

A boot connected with his face creating a sickening crunch as his head rocked back. He thought he had momentarily lost consciousness. Could feel blood stream out of his nose. His broken nose.

“You pissed off Dimitrijevic. He wants me to put a bullet in your brain right now.”

In a world washed with tears, Scott could see the man reach into his pants and produce something. Heard a gun slide being pulled back, a bullet seating in the chamber. Smelled the residue from the ejection port. Felt the barrel pressed against the back of his head.

“My name is Miroslav. I tell you this, so you know who killed you.”

“Wait!” Scott discharged. He still didn’t know what the hell was going on. Everything felt real. “The guns were in the back of the car.”

Gun pushed harder into skin. A voice, right next to his ear. “The only thing in the back of that car was a blue suitcase with some shitty clothes inside. Dimitrijevic needs his guns. So, you will tell me where they are, or I will kill you.”

This can’t be happening. Shouldn’t be happening.

“No!” Scott yelled out. “I’ll get the guns. I’ll get everything.” He didn’t know how to get them, or why they weren’t in the back of the car in the first place. He saw the agents load them in. Rollinson himself showcased one of the containers. Was he being set up?

A pause. Could hear the sounds of traffic, rubber over the roadway. The echo of a distant honk. Detached voices talking, much too garbled to make out the words. He thought about yelling out for help, but what good would that do? Either it was all in his head and wouldn’t matter. He was drowning and couldn’t find his way to surface.

Gun retracted. Picked up by the scruff of his neck to unsteady feet. Cold eyes.

“You have twenty-four hours. There won’t be any second chances. Do you understand?”

Scott nodded.

“Bring them to the club. Oh, and just in case you thought you’d try anything clever; we’re holding onto that Maxine of yours for safe keeping. So, don’t even think about skipping town.”

The fist flew from nowhere. A haymaker by any other standard, but Scott didn't see it until he didn't have time to react. It collided with his face. He groaned out as he spun off his feet, landing flat on the ground.

Through hazy vision, Scott watched a pair of black boots walk away, filling his senses with soft clicks. Noted the white headphone cable in front of his face.

"Who are you?" he croaked. Electricity crackled through every fiber of his being.

The boots stopped. Turned.

"Just bring Xavier and you can go back to your life."

Chapter 6

Scott held onto the sink in his hotel room bathroom. It felt like a week since he had been there. Soap scum sat around the fixtures. A cockroach ran across his field of vision, antennae searching for a signal. Gradually looked up into the mirror. Purple around his eye tender to the touch. Dried blood under his nose, the snout in question was bent. Lifted his shirt to see some bruising on his stomach. More real than real.

He tried to rationalize everything, attempted to separate what was real and what was fake. Everything to do with Dimitrijevic was part of the simulation. He was sure of it. Then who was the person in the alleyway that had made his face a punching bag? He said he wanted Xavier, however he hadn't been a part of any fantasy to date.

He dug the phone out of his pocket and hurriedly redialed a number. Xavier answer the call almost immediately.

“Mr. Harris. I didn't think we'd been talking so soon.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

A second of silence. “What on earth are you talking about? Is everything alright?”

“No, Xavier. No. Things are not alright!”

“What happened?”

“I... I don't know,” he spurted out.

“Take a deep breath, Mr. Harris, and tell me what is going on.”

“Something's wrong. The simulation is all fucked up. I had to kill someone, for god's sake. And then some guy attacked me and wanted me to take you somewhere. And then—”

“Say that again,” Xavier interrupted.

“What?”

“He mentioned my name? Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Scott gasped.

“And this was real? Not part of your *Identity* experience? I need you to be absolutely positive about this.”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ve got the black eye and broken nose to prove it.”

“They’re on to me again...” Xavier’s voice was a whisper.

“What? Who’s onto you?”

“Nothing! Listen to me closely. Pack your belongings, get to the airport and take the first flight.”

“Where to?”

“Anywhere! Just get out of town! After I delete the *Identity* application from your device, I want you to take out the sim card and throw it away. It doesn’t matter where. Then throw the phone away somewhere else.”

“What? No! You can’t take the app away!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Harris, I thought I was doing the right thing. And with the additional security protocols, I didn’t think they’d be able to track you.”

“Who? Who’s tracking me?”

“Just do what I say, Mr. Harris. Best you don’t call me again. I’ll make contact when it’s safe. It’s important you stay alive.”

“Fucking what?” Scott demanded but Xavier had already ended the call.

Scott threw the phone down on the bed and paced the room while squeezing his head. What was real? What was fake? He felt the pull of unfinished business in both directions. How had this happened? How had he come to be in this position? Stopped mid stride, felt the lure of his device, drawing him in. He needed a shot of adrenalin. The buzz. The pleasure.

Scott rummaged in his pockets, found his headphones. Four attempts to plug them in. Jammed the buds into his ears. Swiped to the application. Pressed on the screen.

Scott looked over the black cases of weapons before slamming the lid shut and dropping the Mustang's trunk.

He looked at Woodward. "Listen, if this all goes to hell, I want you to get out of here as fast as you can."

"Allow me to come with you, sir."

Scott shook his head. "This is something I need to do myself. Besides, I'm sure you'll have your hands full out here."

He thrust out his hand. "All the best to you then, sir."

Scott shook it. Electricity flowed through him.

"And to you," he replied.

Scott found walking through an empty club a peculiar feeling. His dancefloor footsteps echoed in the silence as he strode across the room towards the VIP area. True to his word, Dimitrijevic was waiting in the roped-off section, although he could have been waiting anywhere. Maxine sat beside him, her wrists and ankles bound with white cloth. A piece of tape over her mouth. Her expression was a blend of hope and aggression. Seeing her there tore at him, but this was the one place emotion couldn't take over. He needed his mind clear.

Security personnel dispersed as Scott arrived and sat down opposite Dimitrijevic. He reached across the table, grabbed the glass of champagne and drank the contents in a single gulp. He looked to Maxine.

"You okay?"

She nodded.

Dimitrijevic crossed his legs at the knee. "You really should be dead by now," he sneered. "I don't usually let people live who try to screw me over."

"If I was dead, then you wouldn't get your guns," Scott replied.

"That is true. Are the guns here this time?"

Scott nodded. "They're outside."

"Oh, maybe I should kill you now then," Dimitrijevic mocked.

Scott pulled down the hood. "Or I could kill you," he replied coldly.

"A contest? A dispute settled like men?" He pursed his lips and nodded. "I like it." He stood, removing his jacket. He lay it over the back of the couch. Removed his glasses and delicately sat them on the table.

"Wait," Scott said. He grabbed the bottle out of the ice, sculled the contents, and threw the empty receptacle on the ground.

Dimitrijevic watched the glass break into a million fragments. "You got that out of your system? You ready to do this now?"

"Not while all of your guys are here. Send them out back to inspect the goods. Leave us to settle this on our own."

"Very well." Dimitrijevic waved his hand, and the goons departed. He rolled up his sleeves and started stretching his arms.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Dimitrijevic placed a foot on the table and felt the pull of his hamstrings. "Warming up. What the hell are *you* doing?"

"Not warming up."

Dimitrijevic shook his head. "It's your loss. It would be a terrible thing to pull something in the middle of a fight."

Scott watched... then rolled his neck, followed by a few star jumps.

"Okay," Dimitrijevic announced, throwing a few shadow punches. "Before we start, what are the rules?"

"Rules?"

"Of course. How can we fight if we don't know the rules?"

Scott leaned in. "If there were rules, would you stick to them?"

Dimitrijevic mulled this over. Shrugged. “Good point. But one more thing before we start.”

Scott threw his arms in the air. “What?”

“This!”

Scott didn’t know how the foot went as high as it did, or how it seemed to strike him in the side of the head as hard as it did. It was all a blur and then pain up the side of his face. The impact drove him sideways, and he ended up lying face down on the couch.

“You see,” Dimitrijevic said. “This is why you stretch.”

Scott was still coming to terms why he was no longer on his feet when Dimitrijevic suddenly pulled him onto the floor. Scott hit the surface hard. With hands on the collar of his hoodie, Dimitrijevic dragged him along the ground. Face sliced through something sharp. Face off the floor. Face on the floor. Rubbed on the broken glass. Scott screamed out. Glass in deep. Shards climbing into his skin.

“Oh, there is no point screaming like a little girl. We are fighting like men. If you must make a noise, beg me to kill you like a man.”

Then he was alone. Heard footsteps. Different sounds. Turned to see shoes on a table. Then they were in the air. Scott rolled out of the way just in time as Dimitrijevic crashed with a dull thud. The arms dealer yelped and rolled onto his back, holding his knee.

Scott took in deep breaths as he yanked glass debris out of his face. “How’d your stretching work for you there?”

“Fuck you,” Dimitrijevic huffed, trying to regain a standing position.

Scott had just gotten to his feet when Dimitrijevic lunged. Scott was once again being pushed back against his will, powerless to the unstoppable ram that was Dimitrijevic. The duo crashed into a bar, with Dimitrijevic grabbing any nearby object and crashing it down on Scott’s head; two heavy spirits glasses, three flutes, repeated hits with the soda gun. Scott tried to negate each blow, covering his face or disrupting Dimitrijevic’s progress to find new weapons.

“Alright! Alright!” Scott screamed.

Dimitrijevic stepped back. “What do you mean, ‘*alright*?’”

Scott puffed hard. Blood covered his face. His body ached. “I mean we should call it a draw.”

Dimitrijevic laughed hard. “You know, for that, I really should keep you alive.” Then his face changed, morphed into a serious stare. “But for that, I really should kill you.” He grabbed a heavy unopened champagne bottle from the bar, held it above his head like a club. “Today you die like a man.”

He drew back the weapon, brought it down. Then stopped mid-swing. He gasped. Once. Twice. Let the bottle slip from his hands, narrowly missing Scott and crashing on the bar, sending expensive bubbles and glass to the floor.

Dimitrijevic blinked. Turned. Shuffled to the lounge. He held the knife handle that was sticking out of his chest. A large red patch grew on his front. Warmth covered his hands. Breathing became labored. He fell awkwardly on his side.

“Why?” Dimitrijevic gurgled.

“So I can be free,” Scott said. “Free from you. Free from all of this.”

Then the body collapsed. Dimitrijevic didn’t move. Didn’t make a sound. Life extinguished.

Scott rolled the body over. Blinked. Rubbed his eyes. Rubbed blood through his eyes. Slowly pulled at the headphones. Panic swept through him. He dropped to his knees. Wide eyes. Stared. What had he done? He crawled to his wife over the spongy carpet.

“Samantha?” he whispered. “Samantha?”

No response.

“Help!” he screamed. Natural reaction. Fright or flight.

He gently touched her ageless cheeks. Her horrid face that refused to look at him or smile in his direction.

Held her soft hands. Those scrawny claws that refused to touch his disgusting body.

Placed a hand between her bountiful bosom. Those hideous saggy bags she constantly covered away from his repulsed eyes.

He stood. Love and hate colliding in his heart.

Looked to the bad oil painting over his bed. Judging eyes glared back.

He wiped his hands on his pants as the sound of police sirens sparked in the distance.

Chapter 7

Scott sat at the table of the police interview room and stared at himself in the mirror. It was a stark transformation from what he was a few days earlier. Was it a few days? Time seemed like water. He sat with folded arms, shoulders back. Disheveled hair. A broken face. Disinterested expression. A few days growth on his chin, although it might have been more. He was never any good at growing facial hair. Something his wife told him every morning he didn't shave. She was good at pointing out his flaws.

He ignored the opening door. Was too busy preparing for the next round of police interview. Xavier told him not to say anything to anyone, so his responses were vague and stunted. Not that he could provide answers with any substance. What actually happened in that room is a complete mystery to him.

"Mr. Harris. What the hell have you done?"

Scott snapped his head around. Xavier stood at the closed door, briefcase in hand.

"What are you doing here?" Scott questioned.

"My job is to get us both out of here as quickly as possible," Xavier replied, approaching the table and sitting next to Scott.

"I didn't know you were a lawyer," Scott said, thinking back to the ambiguous business card he received in the airport bathroom.

"I'm many things to many people," he replied matter-of-factly. "Now, tell me what you remember. And talk freely, no one can hear us."

Scott shook his head. "I... I don't know. I don't remember anything. One minute I'm in my shitty hotel room talking to you, and then the next..."

“You used the app again,” Xavier stated, finishing Scott’s sentence.

“Well, yes, but you don’t understand. I needed to. You were going to take it from me, and Maxine was in trouble...”

“All fantasy,” Xavier interjected. He looked hard at Scott, as if contemplating his next sentence. “The plane. The girls. Even that spy shit. An invented world to allow you to deal with things in the real world. The flight. The exhibition dinner... Your wife.”

Scott looked down. “I never wanted her dead.”

“Really, Scott? Think hard about that. Because all of this came from you. You get to live out your wildest desires while your subconscious gets you through the tough stuff you can’t bear to face in the real world. The simulation keeps you engaged until endorphins and serotonin soak the neural pathways, until the brainwaves have settled and reached normalcy.” He leaned forward, searching Scott’s eyes. “Until you have become who you truly are.”

Scott explored Xavier’s eyes in return, sought to decipher the underlying message.

Xavier pulled away. “Of course, I never meant for *this* to happen. If I knew you were going to kill Samantha, I would have pulled you from the program.”

“So, what happens now?”

Xavier placed a hand on Scott’s arm. “From what I understand they don’t have any evidence against you, so they aren’t going to lay any formal charges. The hotel manager saw someone wearing a dark hoodie run away after the disturbance, about twenty minutes before you turned up. I’d like to think no one is going to find that hoodie, Mr. Harris. I would also like to think the police are going to arrest someone else matching your description in the coming days.”

“That’s a lot of thinking and not much certainty.”

“Trust me, Mr. Harris. I can make many things happen, including the department eventually making the entire investigation disappear. However, I’m more concerned about the people after you.”

Scott thought back to the brief encounter in the alley, the request to bring Xavier to them. “To be honest, it sounded like they were after you. Who are they?”

When Xavier spoke, it was barely audible. “A concealed department known as Zero Division.”

Scott shrugged. “Never heard of them.”

“They wouldn’t be doing their job if you had.”

“What do they do?”

Xavier pursed his lips. “Pretty much whatever they want. They’ve got a very long and loose leash.”

“What do they want with you?”

“That is something I can’t share. Not yet. Not until you’re ready.”

“So, what the hell do you want me to do then?”

“You are in danger, Mr. Harris. We both are. You need to get the hell out of here. And I don’t mean the city, I mean the country.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Disappear. And wait for me to contact you.”

Scott shook his head in disbelief. “Who are you? Really?”

“It doesn’t matter who I am. It matters who you are.”

“I’m a nobody.”

Xavier shook his head. “For now. Best you keep it that way.” He turned to his briefcase and pulled out an envelope.

“What’s that?” Scott asked.

“Your new identity. Passport, credit card, driver’s license, cash—enough for you to get by. I hope you like the name *Kevin Pyne*. Now, I’ve removed the application from your device, it’s turned into a ticking time bomb. In fact, get rid of your device all together. You can get a new one when you reach your destination. When we get to the airport, don’t talk to anyone, don’t call anyone,

don't tell anyone where you're going. Not even me, understand? I'll find you when it's time."

"I can't believe this is happening," Scott mumbled.

"Believe it, Mr. Harris. Play your cards right and you just might make it out of here alive."

Xavier's Maserati tore up the freeway towards the airport. The journey had so far consisted of deafening silence sloshed over an understated canvas of soft jazz, with Xavier not wishing to elaborate on anything already said, and Scott too afraid to ask any more questions.

As distant cityscape blurred by, Scott felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. A sideways glance to Xavier before easing the device out of his pocket. Xavier told him to get rid of it, and he had every intention of disposing the sim card and device into different police rubbish receptacles. But there were more important things to think about, more pressing issues that consumed his thinking.

He surreptitiously glanced at the device while pretending to look out his window. Noticed something that shouldn't there. It seemed to call for him; he could almost hear it say his name. He could feel the anxiety starting to build. Shifted in his seat. Ground his teeth. The fix was right there. Balanced Xavier's warnings with his own mental anguish. Bit his tongue. Clenched his eyes shut, yet it called to him still.

Secretly inserting the headphone jack into the device proved to be a difficult enterprise, however he evaded detection of his movements. With a cough, he inserted a bud into his ear. Finger hovered over the application. He could feel the connection, taste the sparks between him and the device.

Xavier had just taken an offramp when the car's console emanated a beep. He looked down. Did a double take.

"What the fu... Scott."

Scott didn't respond.

"Scott, what the fuck are you doing? Don't touch that device!"

Scott turned, the headphones hanging from his ears.

"I'm sorry, Xavier."

And he pressed the button.

Scott piled on the gas as he tore the Mustang through the side streets. The airport was within reach, and he knew Maxine would wait with the G6 private jet fueled up and ready to go. He just needed to contend with the Black SUV that had been tailing him for the past few blocks first.

"I think you've lost them, sir," Woodward said, scoping the surrounding area from the passenger's seat.

Suddenly, two identical SUVs skidded out from the side street to join the pursuit. Engines roared, tachometers redlined, as the finish line drew nearer. Another block, and another SUV joined, this one drawing alongside. The black tinted window eased down to reveal Miroslav's irritated face. He slid a thumb under his chin, from ear to ear. Scott didn't have any trouble interpreting the sign language.

One of the tailing cars had pulled up the other side, with the final one regularly kissing his bumper. He almost felt claustrophobic, as the vehicle fought to stay separate from its neighbors.

Scott could see a T-junction approaching and knew that something had to give. Swerved left and right. Sparks flew as the sports car scraped and bounced off the larger vehicles. The end of the road loomed, and Scott had to decide.

"What are you thinking, sir?" Woodward asked, bracing himself to prepare for a collision.

"The worst possible idea," Scott said.

He gripped the steering wheel tight and prepared to jam on the brakes.

“You’re not planning on surrendering, are you, sir?”
Scott looked over. “Not if I can help it!”

Chapter 8

Xavier swore as they swerved down the back streets. It didn't matter where he went, as long as he kept moving as fast as possible. As soon as they stopped, Zero Division would be on them. Scott made sure of that when he started the damn app. How someone installed it back on Scott's device would have to be investigated later. Someone was playing games with their lives, and if he survived the night, he'd make damn sure they paid the price.

The car zig zagged through the industrial area. The airport was out of the question, at least for the foreseeable future, however he still had a few options up his sleeve. He scanned the streets but had no clue where he was going. He felt like he was stuck in a rabbit's warren. He needed to get back out onto the main roads, where there were options. Room to move. Room to think.

Veered right and powered down. Then came to a screeching halt. It was a dead end. He swore as he thumped the steering wheel. Noticed two burning orbs in the rear-view mirror, stalking them.

Xavier's throat instantly squeezed shut. "What the fuck are we going to do now?"

Scott positioned himself so he could see their hunter in the wing mirror. "You got any guns?" he said. Calm soothed through his voice.

Xavier looked over him questioningly, trying to ascertain the best course of action. When was the simulation going to end? What would Scott be like at the end of it?

"In there," he said, pointing to the glovebox.

Scott opened it and withdrew a black semi-automatic pistol. Yanked back the slide like he had been doing it his whole life.

"You got any more?" Scott asked as he inspected the firearm.

Xavier nodded towards the boot.

“Alright then,” Scott said as he turned in his seat and prepared to fire at the van driver through the back window.

“That’s not going to do you any good,” Xavier claimed.

“Why not?”

“Bulletproof glass.”

Scott looked at him. Sighed. “Not such a good idea now, is it?”

“No,” Xavier mumbled. “I guess not.”

Scott sat back in his seat. Stretched his neck.

“I’ve got an idea.”

The van hovered at the beginning of the dead end, engine rumbling. There was no way out and whoever was in it held all the cards. It was like an old-fashioned western gun fight at high noon. The first to move would signal the start of the contest. Winner would take all.

The Maserati lurched backwards, the vehicle instantly transforming from a sleek sports car into a guided missile. The change had been sudden and surprising. The vehicle gained speed remarkably quick, covering the distance before the people in the van could counteract.

Xavier and Scott were on a collision course.

Impact was imminent.

Sometimes the worst ideas were the most powerful.

Scott Harris gripped the steering wheel tight. His Mustang bounced off the surrounding black SUV’s that boxed him in. The shadowing aggressor constantly nudged the rear bumper. The T-junction was fast approaching and Scott knew that something had to give. He gripped the wheel tight.

“You’re not planning on surrendering, are you, sir?” Woodward punched while preparing for impact.

Scott looked over. "Not if I can help it!"

He jammed his foot down on brakes. The consequences were brutal and sudden.

The trailing SUV crashed into the back of the Mustang. Glass smashed and carbon fiber tore away, the impact lurching the Mustang forward and to the left and the SUV into the back of the flanking beast.

The impact jolted Scott and Woodward into their seats from the sudden acceleration, their environment a mash of glass and smoke. Scott yanked down on the steering wheel and careened into the remaining SUV. They hit it dead center, causing the front bumper to crumple and airbags to deploy, shielding their view. The sound of screeching tires and tumbling metal filled the airwaves.

When their car inched to a halt against the gutter, Scott looked over to the passenger seat.

"You alright, Woodward?"

"I'll be fine, Sir," he cringed. "Just need a minute to catch my breath."

"If only I could give you one," Scott replied.

Miroslav, the caretaker head of the Croatian crime family, kicked open his door. The remnant glass still in the frame crashed to the ground in a kaleidoscope of sound. He reached up to the cut above his eye and collected a sample. After investigating the residue, he ran it over his tongue. Revenge coated his features as he ran his tongue over his teeth.

Looking over the carnage, he viewed his men pulling themselves out of the wreckage. He jammed two fingers into his mouth and whistled loudly to get their attention. When the chirp echoed about them, they immediately turned in his direction, like dogs who had picked up on their master's call. Miroslav conveyed several hand ges-

tures. However, they needn't have been experts to interpret the instruction.

They checked their fully automatic machine guns, several of them pulling back on the weapons cocking handle, sending a collective ominous message to their prey. They surrounded and converged on the Rapid red, beat-up Mustang. Miroslav gave the order and all ten machine guns opened fire simultaneously, filling the panels with holes, and breaking any unscathed glass. Tires burst and upholstery exploded as countless bullets tore through the bodywork and into the interior of the wheeled-coffin.

Happy with the conclusion, Miroslav held up his hand. One of his thugs approached the wreckage carefully, his gun up, sights trained on the front of the vehicle. When he inspected the interior, his head dropped.

“Nisu ovde,” he shouted out.

Miroslav bared his teeth in frustration.

“Well, find him and kill him,” he ordered.

One mercenary turned in time to see one of his crew's brain explode through a balaclava, as a pair of leather shoes came baring down onto his face. It was all he could do to let loose a couple of shots as he reactively squeezed the trigger on his machine gun.

Scott had deftly climbed to the roof of the SUV as the crew of killers encircled his smashed-up ride. He knew their initial attention would be on the debris, allowing him and Woodward time to outflank them. From across the street, he could tell he had pissed Miroslav off, and rightly so. In fact, he would feel the same way. And given Dimitrijevic executed Special Agent Rollinson, he knew exactly how it felt. An eye for an eye.

After they delivered a deluge of shrapnel into his car and determine his absence from the vehicle, it was the perfect time to strike. He jumped for the nearest thug, firing a round into the head of a

nearby soldier. A spurt of brain exploded from the side of his head and the lifeless body fell face-first onto the pavement.

Continuing with his trajectory, Scott landed on the guard's face, driving him down. The back of his head impacted with a wet squelch, silencing his itchy trigger finger. Scott rolled away and ran for the nearby cover of his car, firing into the crew of mercenaries as he did so.

Woodward matched his gunfire as he darted from the street corner, squeezing his trigger repeatedly at every soldier he could find. A trail of sparks on the concrete chased him behind one of the SUVs.

Mercenaries launched their return attack, alternating a barrage of fire between them. One of them kneeled on one knee to insert a new clip of death, only to receive a bullet to the face, destroying his identifiable features. Another found himself without kneecaps as the death projectiles found their mark. A headshot silenced his agonizing groans.

After Scott bombarded them with indiscriminate firing, he clicked dry. He dropped behind his cover and waited for the return volley to cease. Taking one last look at the gun, he placed it on the ground. It would be no more use to him in the fight. He limbered up his hands and shoulders, as best he could manage given the circumstances, and waited for his moment to pounce.

The cracking of weapon discharging ended suddenly. Sounds of bodies being dragged over concrete enveloped the area as injured mercenaries, the ones still alive, dragged themselves to the sidelines for treatment. Those still capable of killing closed in on their quarry, weapons at the ready, fingers hovering over the triggers.

Scott heard the sounds of footfalls edging closer. He knew he would have one chance at a surprise attack. As soon as he caught sight of the barrel, he would grab it, yanking the mercenary down, over-powering the assailant, and use their weapon to take down the

remaining attackers. As Scott thought about the ensuing turning of the tables, he smirked. It seemed like child's play.

A machine gun barrel came into view and Scott prepared himself. Just as he was about to launch, he felt something hard in the back of his head. He paused, stopped breathing. Turned slowly. Beyond the tip of the killing machine were a pair of cold eyes beaming from the holes of a balaclava. The soldier waved, and Scott knew he was in some deep shit.

The guard shoved him hard in the back as he presented his prisoner to Miroslav. Woodward was already on his knees in front of the crime family's new boss, sporting a large red patch on his shoulder, courtesy of a successful round.

Surrounded by the destruction of cars and bodies, Miroslav produced a cigarette, lit it and took a deep breath. He, too, was without harm. However, despite the blood streaking from his arm and leg, he showed no discomfort on his face.

"Now," he said between puffs. "Now we settle the score. Now we get our revenge on you."

He extracted a nickel-plated revolver from his waistband and pointed it at Scott's head. Then he shifted the barrel to Woodward's face.

"No, you don't deserve to die first. You deserve to watch your comrade die. And there's nothing you can do about it."

Scott looked down, searching the ground for an answer to the predicament. He thought through every strategy, every potential opportunity, without success.

"No," Miroslav grunted. "Look at me."

Scott raised his head and into the dead expression.

"I want you to watch. I want you to watch me execute him. Then it will be your turn."

The pair locked eyes as the hammer slowly pulled back.

“It was a pleasure working with you, sir,” Woodward said gracefully. “May our paths cross again.”

BLAM!

But it didn’t originate from Miroslav’s canon. Scott flinched at the boom and saw a puff of red mist erupt from the side of Miroslav’s head. His lifeless body turned over and slumped to the ground.

Several more shots followed, as every member of the Miroslav clan fell where they stood. The shooter didn’t spare the already prone bodies from the onslaught.

Woodward and Scott looked at each other, then turned and looked up. A figure on top of the building stood, lugging their sniper rifle onto their shoulder. With the sun directly behind them casting their body in shadow, the silhouette saluted, then disappeared from view.

Scott stood and surveyed the terror.

“You okay, Woodward?”

“I’ll survive just fine, sir. And you?”

“Alive... thanks to Maxine.”

“Damn fine handy agent to have around, sir.”

“You’re telling me. Now, you think we can get one of these shredded SUV’s working?”

They took in the condition of the wrecks and almost regretted asking the question. It didn’t take a mechanic to figure out the answer to the question.

Woodward turned to Scott. “There’s something I must tell you, sir.”

“What is it, Woodward?”

A garbled response. Scott’s surroundings warped. Colors collided. Sound merged. Time seemed to slow.

“What?” Scott asked.

Xavier placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I said it’s time I told you something.”

Scott looked around as he slowly removed his headphones. The *Identity* app had done it again. Night had taken over the late afternoon canvas he was just living in. A mangled car wreck was the centerpiece, surrounded by numerous bodies, guns and spent ammunition.

“What the hell is going on?” Scott pleaded.

“Look at me, Scott.”

Mesmerized. So much carnage. So many bodies.

Woodward shook him. “Scott!”

Scott turned, half dazed, caught in a world between dream and reality. Numb.

“Scott. You are more than you think you are. And there is much to do. But first we need to get the hell out of here.”

In the distance a roar echoed, an engine redlining.

And heading right for them.

REALITY

“Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.”

Albert Einstein

“The worst lies are the ones you tell yourself.”

Anonymous

Chapter 9

One week earlier

Xavier took a sip from his coffee. The coffee shop provided both the much-needed oasis from the hustle and bustle of the airport took place around him, as well as a perfect vantage point to stalk their prey. Passengers darted in every direction, luggage, and children in tow. With startling regularity, an efficient announcement would blast over the airwaves and people would change direction to head towards another gate.

“Are you sure this Scott Harris is going to be here today?” his guest asked, her eyes furtively gazing over every passenger's face, desperately seeking a match.

Another sip. “According to my information.”

“Can we trust it?” she asked, maintaining her vigil.

“We don't have a choice,” he said, his voice even and rational. “We need him to win the war. Else we will grind each other into oblivion.”

“Maybe it's for the best,” she quipped.

Sipped his coffee. “Maybe it is.” Then, “There,” he said, nodding his head into the crowd.

“Where?” Maxine asked, trying to home in on the target.

“Along the far edge near the first class entry. Blue sports coat with the backpack. That is our Mr. Scott Harris.”

Maxine looked over Scott. He stepped to the side to let a conga line of hurrying passengers run towards their respective gates. Kept his eyes downcast, avoiding any contact.

“That guy? Really?”

“Really,” Xavier said. “Don’t try to understand it. Things will make sense later.” He stood.

“He looks like he’s going to be sick,” she scoffed.

Scott stopped, his hand on his stomach as he read the signs. He found what he was looking for and carried on his slow journey, attempting to stay out of everyone’s way.

“Shit!” Xavier wheezed.

“What is it?” she asked, her focus still on Scott.

“A Zed. Twenty paces behind.”

She searched through the crowds. Sure enough, she spotted the intruder zeroing in on his own prey.

“What the hell are they doing here?”

“They’re here for the same reason we are.”

“But how did they know Scott would be here?”

“That, I don’t know. No use thinking about it now.”

“Maybe we need to have a little talk with this source of yours,” Maxine quipped, returning her attention to Scott, who disappeared around a corner. She spotted the restroom sign hanging from the ceiling. “Figures.”

“We’ll worry about the source later,” Xavier said. “We’ve got more important things to tend to.”

“You want me to deal with him?”

“No,” Xavier said, buttoning his jacket. “I’ll take care of him. You take care of the rest. You know as well as I do they travel in packs.” He sneered at the remark.

“Of course,” she replied.

He ran a hand through the chestnut mop on his head. “Same rules apply. If the worst should happen, get back to the facility.”

“As always,” she said.

“Time to go kill a Zed and charm the pants off Mr. Harris.”

“The fate of the world relies on it,” she added.

“Quite,” Xavier acknowledged.

Chapter 10

One week later

A roar echoed from down the intersection, an engine redlining. A gray Jeep arrived at pace and skidded to a halt. The door flung open, and the driver leaned out.

“Get in! Hurry!”

But Scott’s attention is on the scene in front of him. He shook away from Xavier’s hand that was resting on his shoulder. Xavier’s Maserati was mangled against the front of a dark van, both vehicles totaled, and he couldn’t tell where one car ended and the other began. Black-clad bodies littered the street, all in various poses of arms and legs. Semi-automatic machine guns and spent ammunition casings covered the area. He looked down and noted the pistol in his hand. He dropped it like it was a poisonous snake.

A body lay near his feet and he initially thought it was Woodward, before separating the fantasy from the reality. He bent down to inspect it further. They were riddled with bullets. He grabbed the balaclava, more out of instinct than conscious thought, and revealed the face of one attacker. Whether this would bring any solace to him, he didn’t know.

A noise in the distance, fighting its way through the fog hanging over Scott’s senses. Then again, louder this time. Shouting. Footsteps on road surface coming towards him. Xavier’s face came into view. Steel eyes through sweat laden chestnut hair. Mouthed words were silent like the television was on mute. Again and again. Xavier shook his shoulders. Scott could make out the words. Get. In. The. Car.

Scott shook his head and his senses returned to perfect working order with a fury that almost made his head explode.

A honking horn. Beyond Xavier, someone sitting in the driver's seat screaming at him. Definitely female, but with the shadows and shock, he couldn't make her out entirely. Her silhouette looked so familiar, yet he couldn't put a finger on it.

"What the fuck happened here?" Scott managed to get out.

"I'll tell you on the way," Xavier said as he waved a gun around. "Now, hurry."

He pulled Scott towards the Jeep.

"We haven't got much time."

The Jeep swerved around corners with little regard for road rules and traffic laws. However, given the current situation, all cards were off the table. Scott sat behind the driver and held on to the panic rails as he jostled around in the back seat, his mind still playing catch up to the most recent events. Xavier was in the passenger seat, alternating glances with his phone and the ever-changing view out the front windshield, shouting directions to the driver.

"We've got to get in the air," he shouted.

"I thought you said they would have the airports covered," Scott yelled from the back seat. He needed to interject himself before he threw up all over the leather.

"We're not going to the airport," he replied over his shoulder.

"Well, then where are we going?"

"I'll tell you when we get there... if we get there."

His tone didn't offer Scott any assurances he would still be breathing at the end of the night.

"Is there anything you can tell me? Like, what the hell is going on?!"

Xavier turned. "Scott, I will tell you everything, as soon as we are safe and away from here."

"Was that Zero Division? Is that who you were talking about?"

"Leave it, Scott."

"At least tell me why they are after me."

"They're not after you," Xavier shouted over the roar of the engine and screeching tires. "They're after me."

"You?"

"I'm not some snooty entrepreneur, Mr. Harris. I'm not what you think at all."

"You just got caught up in the cross-fire," the driver added.

"Thank you, mystery person," Scott fired back. "And just who the hell are you?"

"The person who just saved your ass!" she said, sass all over her tone like a jalapeno salsa.

"Scott, meet Maxine. Maxine, meet Scott. There. Introductions done," Xavier announced.

"Maxine? Really?" Scott peered around the seat to the driver, taking in as much of her features as he could as the cabin shook, the chassis under immense pressure as it rocketed around corners at breakneck speed. The voice. The messy short blonde hair.

"Jesus Christ," Scott said, sitting back firmly in his seat. "You're Maxine!"

"No shit," she quipped. "That's just what Xavier said."

"No! I mean, you're identical to the Maxine I've seen in the app."

She negotiated the metal missile around several fast-moving vehicles like they were parked, and looked over to Xavier. "You haven't told him yet, have you?"

"Told me what?"

Xavier looked to her, then Scott, then back to his phone.

"You really should tell him," she pushed.

"Tell me what?" Scott repeated.

“It’s not fair, you know.”

“For fuck’s sake, someone tell me!”

“Enough,” Xavier shouted. He turned to Scott. “Listen, it’s complicated. I said I’ll tell you once we’re safe. So just find some bloody patience.” He turned to Maxine. “And you, shit-stirrer, just drive the damn car. I’d prefer to limit my gun-fights to one per night, thank you very much.”

Scott sank back into his seat and stared down at his stained blue sports coat and blood-streaked pants. His wife’s DNA was on there somewhere, mixed with dirt, grime, and results of a firefight. His life had turned upside down in the space of days. Just as his *Identity* app experiences had increased in intensity, so too has his real life. It used to be complete with stationery sales calls and monotone reports, but now car chases and urban firefights were the main features. His weapon used to be a five percent discount with orders over two hundred bucks. Now it was a nine-millimeter. And on top of it all, his fantasy girl, Maxine, was real... and a reckless driver. From stationery salesperson to murder suspect to being on the run from a mysterious group of people. How Xavier would thread the story together was beyond him, but based on the shit he had to go through, the shit he had been through, it had better be damn good.

The industrial landscape transformed into the jungle of multi-tiered motorways, and then into concrete and glass as the city grew around them. Lights got brighter, the population denser, and Maxine’s speed dropped off considerably. Gentle rain spatter hit every window at once, causing steam to rise from the roadway.

“Another three blocks,” Xavier instructed.

“Is transportation ready?” Maxine asked.

“And waiting.” Xavier removed weapons from the glovebox and handed one to Scott in the back seat.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with that?” Scott asked as he avoided taking ownership.

“The same thing you just did to those people back there.”

Scott took the weapon and rested it on the seat beside him.

A squeal of tires from behind made Xavier and Scott turn. Through the raindrop patterned rear window, twin black sports utilities fired from an intersection and turned onto the street.

“God damn it,” Xavier breathed. “How the hell did they track us so fast?”

He looked to Scott, who held up the headphones in his hands.

Xavier narrowed his eyes.

“Are we gonna make it?” Maxine yelled.

“There!” Xavier pointed out the windshield.

Maxine launched the Jeep up the gutter, smashing a mailbox and crushing several outdoor tables and chairs belonging to a restaurant. People ran in all directions, attempting to evade the unpredictable path of the crazy driver. Maxine crunched the brakes, and the jeep skidded to a stop outside the front doors of an office building.

“Leave the tech, grab the guns, and let’s go,” Xavier ordered.

The three jumped out and abandoned the still idling four-wheel drive. Xavier glimpsed the sports utilities as he ushered the others inside.

“Hurry,” he yelled, throwing a bag to Maxine. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“What are you going to do?” Scott asked between breaths.

“Slow them down.”

Scott’s eyes rested on the bullet hole in Xavier’s shoulder. Whatever the impact, it didn’t seem to slow him down. Xavier noticed.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll be just fine.”

Scott followed Maxine around a corner to a bank of elevators, her sniper rifle slung over her shoulder. She dropped Xavier’s bag in the middle of the floor and paced the hallway, checking her ordinance.

“You going to call an elevator?” Scott asked.

She shrugged. "Don't need to."

It was his first opportunity to take all of her in, and he couldn't help but stare. She looked identical to the Maxine when he used the *Identity* app, including bright blue eyes that constantly scanned the area.

"Do," Scott started. "Do you remember me?"

She fixed her stare on him. Lust replaced with despondence.

He watched as she skillfully ejected the magazine, checked the rounds, then slammed it home with a satisfying clack. She looked at the gun in Scott's hand and nodded.

"You going to check that?"

Scott looked at it and held it up. "Do I need to?"

When the two took off, Xavier watched the driveway entrance from the safety of a large, marble support pillar. The twin vehicles approached from either side of the driveway, blocking in the Jeep. Xavier smiled and pressed a button on his phone.

The detonation was fierce. The carnage took place before anyone heard it. Amidst a red fireball, the primary shock wave split the two sports utilities in half horizontally. The secondary wave pushed the vehicles back like leaves in a storm. Xavier covered his ears as the three-story glass panels on either side of him erupted in a shower of fragments. Building fire alarms erupted and swirled with metal crunches of vehicles landing on concrete, activating the foyer sprinkler system.

Scott cowered when the explosion shook the building. He could hear the hiss of the fire sprinklers take action, overshadowed by the quick pace of heavy footfalls heading towards them. When Xavier

arrived, Scott followed them into the nearest elevator. Xavier pressed some buttons into his phone and the lift doors closed.

“I didn’t think lifts worked when there was a fire,” Scott said.

“Usually they don’t,” Maxine said.

“But they do when you know how to override the system,” Xavier added, holding up his phone.

Scott looked over at his companions.

“How the hell are you two so damn calm?”

Maxine smiled. “You’ll learn.”

“You’ll *remember*,” Scott corrected.

The lift doors opened into a small glass cubicle; a black, sleek helicopter sat just beyond. The five blades of the main rotor spun at a lazy pace, yet seemed to increase in speed with each passing moment. As the three ran towards it, Scott noted the shrouded tail rotor and absence of any markings.

They bundled into the open door as the downdraft picked up in intensity. Scott jumped into one of the leather seats and buckled his belt as fast as he could, tightening the straps until he had trouble breathing. It was his first time in a helicopter, although it was also his first time holding a gun, his first time in a shootout. That was his life. A string of firsts.

Xavier, seated backwards behind the pilot near the door, gave the order and the machine lifted into the air with ease. He kept his focus on the lifts and whispered to himself.

“Hurry, please,” he requested, as a shower of sparks struck the helicopter.

The pilot took evasive action and peeled off, nosing up to escape the shower of bullets coming from the roof.

Maxine looked to Scott.

“Jesus, you look like shit.”

“Fuck you, Maxine.”

“Just breath,” she said. “You’ll be fine.”

Chapter 11

Once the aircraft had leveled out and their mysterious attackers were left behind, Scott clicked his fingers towards Xavier.

“Hey! You going to tell me where we’re going now?”

Xavier leaned forward. “We’re going to a place you won’t find on any map. A long-forgotten military base in the Pacific.”

“You mean, like, the ocean.”

“Given the context, is there another Pacific?”

“Fine. Why are we going there and not to the police?”

Maxine let out an exuberant laugh.

Xavier sighed as he looked to Maxine. “You’re right, it isn’t fair.” Then to Scott, “I’m sorry, Scott. You’ve been on quite the journey and I’ve been holding everything back from you. But it’s been purposeful and for a very good reason. I promise I’ll tell you everything and answer any of your questions, provided you give me something in return.”

“I don’t really have anything to give you, Xavier. In these days I’ve lost my wife, my identity. I’m pretty sure I don’t have a job anymore... won’t come Monday, anyway.”

“Scott, you have more to give than you know. You are more than you think.” He looked down. “Let me start at the beginning. We’re going to a place called The Playground. Its primary purpose was for training and scientific research. Now it’s a bunch of derelict buildings. But we’re more interested in what’s under the surface.”

“What’s under the surface?”

Xavier paused, glancing at the black canvas outside. He turned back. “It’s easier to show you than tell you.”

Scott chewed the response over. “Fine. But why there?”

“Because it’s forgotten, because the people after us don’t know about it. Besides, it’s got the tools we need to help you. And before you ask, it’s like I said before. It’s easier to show you than tell you.”

“So, what are you, ex-military? A rogue scientist? Is that why they’re after you?”

Xavier chewed his lip. “I know it might not seem like it, but you’re asking a lot of complex questions that you might not like the answers to.”

“Fine, Xavier. But you haven’t really told me anything yet.”

“Geez,” Maxine said. “Was I this bad?”

“Worse,” Xavier grunted.

Scott looked at Maxine. “And just who the hell are you and where did you come from?”

“Maxine was once just like you,” Xavier said. “She’s been following you around for months just to make sure we had the right person.”

“What? What do you mean? I didn’t see anyone following me around.”

“Exactly,” Maxine interjected.

“You think you were some random fool I met in the airport bathrooms?” Xavier queried.

Scott couldn’t answer.

“The answer is ‘No’, Mr. Harris. I know there is a lot to get your head around, and when we land, I can tell you all about—.”

The cabin erupted in a series of alarms.

A voice came over the speaker system. “Sir, we have unidentified aircraft approaching fast.”

Xavier grabbed a pair of headphones hanging against the cabin and thrust them on. “Where the hell did they come from?”

“Out of nowhere, sir.”

“Evasive maneuvers.”

Scott's limbs flailed as the helicopter took action, ducking and weaving, before hitting its ceiling elevation. The passengers looked out the window as two black, sleek helicopters moved up to the flank position. Scott noted the rocket launcher attached to the underside of the wingtips.

Scott swore. Loudly. "But we'll be okay, right? Like we've got air-to-air missiles or something?"

"Mr. Harris, this is a civilian aircraft, not some Rambo special," Xavier said. "I'm trying to figure out how the hell they keep tracking us. The only tech we have is mine, and that's untraceable."

Scott's eyes went wide. Slowly, he pulled his phone from his pocket.

Xavier stopped mid-thought. "What the hell is that? I told you to leave it in the car."

"You said a lot of stuff, and I was confused, okay?"

"No!" Maxine said. "It is not okay."

"God damn it, Scott. If you don't want to die, you'll do as I tell you!"

Maxine reached over and grabbed the device, headphones and all, before moving to the door.

"Hey," Scott yelled, awkwardly escaping his seat restraints. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"What you should have done when we pulled up to the building. I'm getting rid of this."

She slid open the door a foot and flicked the device out the window.

Scott met her at the door. "Shit! That's got my app on it. What the hell am I supposed to do now?" Something caught his attention over her shoulder and he moved closer to the door to inspect it.

The accompanying helicopters sliding door had opened, and something pushed forth from the black interior.

"Is that what I think it is?" Scott asked.

Xavier and Maxine looked. “Yes!” they shouted in unison.

Tracer rounds from both sides lit up the sky and struck the cockpit. More alarms sounded as the pilots slumped on the controls, and the aircraft dipped into a flat spin.

“What the fuck are we going to do now?” Scott said as he struggled to hold keep his feet.

“Well, I’m going to make sure we don’t crash.”

Maxine extracted two small devices and thrust them into Scott’s ears. He could feel the objects bury deep into his ear canal, like tentacles trying to get to his brain. Then she ripped a beanie out of Xavier’s bag and pulled it over his head.

He looked at her with questioning eyes.

“Because, it’s cold outside,” she said.

“Excuse me? Outside?” Scott questioned.

Ignoring the query, she held up a device and strapped it to his forearm.

“What the hell is that?”

“That, as you put it, is on a three-second delay, and will count-down once you hit the external air pressure.”

“What the hell do you want me to do?”

She looked over his shoulder and slid the door open. “You’re going to go fix your fuck up.”

“What? How?”

She smirked. “You’ll figure it out!”

With the final word, she pushed him backwards.

Scott’s eyes went wide as his view of Maxine standing in the cabin shrunk. He reached out to grab something to stop his fall, but everything was beyond reach. The mixture of rotor downforce and gravity dragged him down and away. The turbulent force spun him around. With arms and legs thrashing against the wind, Scott had enough time to see aircraft running lights below him. Then he blacked out.

Chapter 12

Scott shot through the dusk air like a bullet at terminal velocity. Reds and oranges spread out over the horizon, the sun looking like someone had smashed it against the ground in a fit of rage. He breathed in oxygen from a tank attached to his chest and viewed the GPS coordinates on a panel attached to his forearm. A voice came over the device in his ears.

“Mr. Harris, this is Deputy Director Krantz of the National Clandestine Service. I’m glad you’re part of this mission, and sorry we couldn’t do this in person before your departure. This mission is simple, Mr. Harris. Two four-wheel drives, carrying mercenaries loyal to Dimitrijevic and Miroslav, are headed to the airport to intercept your G6 private jet. If they compromise the jet, they could extract the coordinates of our top-secret base, along with the names and identities of every agent in the field. This is an unacceptable outcome. You will stop those cars reaching their destination, in any way possible, and eliminate all potential threats. They are fighting for the deaths of their crime family’s leaders. We are fighting for the execution of Special Agent Rollinson. God speed Mr. Harris. Out.”

When he hit three thousand feet, an alarm sounded in his ear that matched the alert on the screen on his forearm. He pulled the cord, and a chute opened, arresting his descent to a reasonable speed, as he positioned himself over one of the cars. He unclipped the parachute landed deftly with a solid thud, surfing the vehicle as it tore down an empty motorway.

On one knee and jamming a foot under the roof rack, he removed his Smith & Wesson nine-millimeter and aimed it at the driver of the opposite vehicle. Easiest damn mission ever, he thought as he pulled the trigger. The vehicles turned suddenly, the centrifugal

forces causing Scott to lose his balance. He fell backwards, gripping onto the side of the roof rack at the last second, his feet skipping over the roadway. His gun skipped away over the asphalt, out of sight. Shit!

Looking through the rear passenger window, he could see the mercenaries inside gearing up for their assault on the G6. Machine guns were being loaded and readied. The soldier closest to him looked around to him, then did a double take. He screamed something and the driver instantly swerved, Scott's legs flying as he struggled to find any purchase.

The man placed his machine gun against the glass, right at Scott's head. Scott closed his eyes, waiting for the impact. There was a thud and Scott looked into the spiderweb of cracks that resulted from a round being fired into the bulletproof glass. He smiled as the mercenary grimaced and pulled himself back onto the roof.

The vehicles took a motorway exit and Scott steadied himself for the change in speed and dynamics. Unprepared for what happened next, the grunt poked his head up. Held on by their comrade, the soldier leaned out and aimed. Scott slammed a foot down on the weapon, jamming the man's hands underneath. He screamed as Scott kicked at his face, the force enough to shake him loose from his safety grip, and he tumbled across the roadway. Scott looked back to see the prone body skid to a halt on the asphalt.

Then he roared in pain as he fell to the car roof with a smack. He carefully investigated the knife handle sticking out from his calf. He took a few deep breaths as he wrapped a hand around the handle, preparing himself to yank it out. But before he could complete the backyard medical procedure, a body was straddling him.

"Welcome, comrade," the man sneered and threw a punch into the side of the unwanted guest's head.

Day turned to night in an instant. Pain engulfed his body. Scott screamed in agony as he attempted to get his bearings. Gushing wind enveloped him, causing noise to disappear and reappear every second. To his right, he could make out some flashing lights. He knew he was in a helicopter; he just had no idea how he came to be there. There was a weight on his chest, making breathing a near-impossible task.

“I said, where are you going?” the man said, his voice deep and rough.

Scott looked at the pale eyes behind the balaclava. Opened his mouth but had no idea what to say. Invariably out of his depth, all he could manage was a weak groan. All he could think about was the pain he was about to endure. The man pulled his fist back, ready to unleash a disturbing blow. Then his head snapped back, and he fell to the side.

Scott looked over to the helicopter hovering to my right and noted a rifle barrel sticking out from a hole in the cockpit. That’s when he saw it. He focused on the small device on the cabin floor. He wasn’t sure how it came out, whether by impact or force.

Another covered face hovered over Scott, this one upside down.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he shouted.

Scott jammed the device back into his ear canal.

Scott looked up into the masked face. Scott wasn’t sure how or when they got on the vehicle roof, but there they were. They said something in their native tongue, and even though their words and meaning were lost in the hectic nature of the battle, the handgun indicated an undeniable intention.

Reaching down, Scott grabbed the knife handle. With a guttural groan, he yanked the knife out of his leg and into the groin of the attacker. The soldier howled, dropping his weapon instantly. Scott

kicked, and the man flew off the back of the vehicle, his landing the least of his problems.

Scott got to shaky legs with the support of the machine gun, courtesy of his first encounter. He turned to the front and leaped up. Time seemed to stand still as he flew through the air, yet he was confident the inertia would carry him to his intended target. He landed heavily across the windshield, rendering it useless.

The driver, whether by shock or strategy, hit the brakes. The four-wheel-drive skidded to a halt. With nothing holding him back, Scott flew off the front, rolling several times on the road before coming to a halt. Blood and bruises covered his entire body, and he was looking forward, more now than ever, to a cold beer at the end of the day.

A foot kicked at the damaged windscreen. Once, twice, three times before he kicked it out onto the hood. They glanced at the prone body lying on the ground and smiled as they idled forward. It would be an easy kill.

Suddenly, Scott rose into a seated position. Before the driver and passenger could react, Scott released two shots in rapid succession. Both men slumped forward, blood draining from their faces. This, however, did not stop the vehicle, as it slowly crept towards him. Scott lay flat on the road, his weapon across his chest, and kept his appendages clear from the slowly rotating, large tires.

When the vehicle had come to rest against a light pole, Scott pulled himself out and inspected his ride. It would have to do. He yanked open the door of the idling SUV and pulled the driver out by the collar, the body landing with a wet crunch. He climbed in and looked over to the dead body in the passenger seat.

“You ready?”

The sun was almost extinguished as the second mercenary transport busted through a secured, wire-mesh fence. Dirt and stones kicked up as the vehicle skidded onto the tarmac and sped towards the lone G6. Suddenly, the vehicle swerved out of control as the rear

tires disintegrated amidst a torrent of machine gun spray. The driver pressed on towards its destination, despite leaving shredded tires in its wake. Sparks flew as the rims hit asphalt, creating an impressive shower of sparks.

Scott powered down, gritting his teeth through the open air of the windowless metal beast. He discarded the machine gun to the dead body in the passenger seat and gripped the steering wheel. Without slowing, he rammed into the rear side of the vehicle, causing it to shudder before catching and crashing to its side. Sparks erupted as it slid across the tarmac, edging closer to Scott's private jet.

He drove around the down SUV as topside doors flung open. Mercenaries pulled themselves up and took their firing positions. Bullets flew around Scott, smacking the interior with a sizzle. He accelerated again and held on tight as he aimed his seconded vehicle for the middle of the undercarriage. The looks on the soldiers' faces grew from anger to shock as Scott made impact, the force injuring their backs beyond repair.

Scott eased down from his driver's position and limped over to the injured soldiers with a grenade in hand that he found in his vehicle. Pulled the pin. Tossed it inside. Walked away.

Maxine and Woodward stood at the bottom of the stairs. Maxine's head was bandaged, and Woodward's arm was in a sling. Amongst warm greetings, the disabled four-wheel-drive exploded, creating a momentary second sun.

It was early hours, and ocean spray coated him. Scott blinked several times before realizing he was standing in front of the real Maxine and Xavier. He worked the plugs out of his ears and pushed them into his pocket.

"Not too shabby," she said, half-pleased.

Scott took in his surroundings. A runway ran the length of the island, with some sheds and squat concrete buildings lining the northern end. The ocean stretched away in every direction; waves lapped against the surrounding rocks. Behind him, he noticed a large, black helicopter, laying on its side on the helipad, surrounded with scorch marks. The rotor blades that were still attached were mangled.

Scott turned back. "Holy shit," he said. "Did I do that?"

"Yeah," Maxine said. "You did that. I mean, not *all* of that, but credit's due, where credit's due."

"Remarkable," Xavier stated. "Just remarkable." Then he turned to Maxine. "And you thought I had the wrong person. You owe me fifty bucks."

Scott held his arms out. "Am... Am I floating? I feel like I'm floating."

"Because you are," Xavier said. "Don't think of this place like an island. Consider it more of an iceberg."

The duo turned and started walking towards an aircraft hangar.

Scott reached down to the pain in his leg. He smeared the blood between his fingers. "Guys! I think I've been..."

Then Scott collapsed onto the tarmac.

Chapter 13

Scott woke on an old military cot. The small concrete box he found himself in was dark and cool. Shadows clung to the walls, and faint murmurings floated on a draft that circulated through the open doorway. He noted the IV line attached to his arm and followed the tube to a bag hanging on the wall. His leg was bandaged, and, curiously, stretching his foot only sent a dull pain to his receptors.

He sat up on the edge of the cot and placed his feet on the floor. Cold worked through his soles. Wincing, he slowly pulled the conduit from the peripheral vein. Just the thought of it all made him want to vomit, and he puffed his cheeks repeatedly to fight off the temptation. Using the wall for support, he eased himself up and padded out into the murky gray.

“Ah, he’s awake,” Xavier announced. He was sitting at a metal table with Maxine, sharing some old MREs he found in the storeroom.

Scott rubbed his head and limped his way to the table, easing down on the hard surface. Old fluorescent tubes cast a dull light over the area. Dozens of similar tables and chairs lay dormant. Bare cupboards lined a wall; drawers and doors opened to expose their emptiness. A drip echoed in the distance.

“Alright, Xavier. No more games, no more delays. Tell me everything right now or I’m out. You can take me back to the mainland, drop me off, and I’ll fend for myself.”

“Very well, Mr. Harris. Come, I’ll give you a tour and tell you everything.”

“Not sure if you noticed, but some bastard stabbed me in my calf, so walking is a bit tough.”

“Nonsense,” Xavier replied. “The pain is all in your head. Trust me, you can walk fine.” He stood and walked to a dark, perpendicular walkway, turned and waited.

Scott pushed himself off the table, taking care of his leg. When he put pressure on it, only the dull thud of discomfort washed over him.

“See?” Xavier queried. “It’s fine. Maxine, go and check on the others, make sure they’re prepared for the next phase of events.”

Scott walked over to Xavier. “Others?”

“Oh yes,” Xavier crooned. “There are others. But for now, let’s talk about what you really want to know.”

“Can I get some shoes or something?”

“I’ll organize something soon.”

Xavier took off down the dimly lit, narrow corridor, Scott just behind. Xavier’s footsteps on the metal-grate walkway echoed infinitely. Each door they passed had a glass panel, the black stencil had worn away with time. Some rooms were dark and empty, while others held computer panels and switchboards.

“I was once part of a clandestine operation titled Project Emporium. This man-made island we are currently under was the central base for those operations. Here they performed testing, training... various experiments. There were numerous facets to this operation. The one you need to know about was called Trojan Horse. It’s the program that you, Scott Harris, are part of.”

Scott grabbed Xavier on the shoulder, forcing him to turn around. “What? Me?”

“Why, of course.”

“But, I’m a nobody, a nothing. A blip on the radar. I sell stationery for a living! How could I be part of some secret government program?”

“Two things, Mr. Harris. This operation was run by *a* government, not *the* government. And you don’t remember because that is how they programmed you as part of your training.”

Xavier clanged down the metal stairs, leaving Scott on the walkway trying to understand what he meant.

Scott caught up with Xavier on the lower platform. Rooms ran along the perimeter, some lit up, others extinguished into black. Scott looked over the edge for the first time. Levels cascaded down into an abyss. Looking up, the view did not fare any better. Level upon level of metal flooring worked its way out of sight.

“This place is incredible,” Scott said absentmindedly.

“It’s what power and money can achieve.”

Xavier smirked and walked off.

“Wait! What do you mean by programming and training?”

Xavier took a deep breath. “You’re a sleeper agent, Scott.”

“A what?”

“You’ve been living a lie, Scott.”

“A lie? What about my job... my wife!”

“All cover, Mr. Harris. Deep cover.”

“My wife was an agent as well?”

“Oh, no, she was real. The job as well. The authorities felt it boosted your cover. But that’s my point, everything about you is a lie. In fact, Scott Harris isn’t even your name.”

“What *is* my name?”

“That’s inconsequential, but if you must know, it’s a series of characters.” He turned to face his companion. “For the sake of the original program, it was perfect. However, if it’s all the same to you, it’s easier to just keep calling you Scott Harris.”

“So, this is all Zero Division?”

Xavier smiled and took a breath. “No. That is something else.”

“Something else?”

Xavier pushed his way through a door and into a well-lit room, with Scott close behind. In the center of the room was a chair that Scott could only describe as a dental chair. Various instruments with dials, screens, and cables congregated around the head.

“This looks like some type of torture device,” Scott exclaimed.

“Well,” Xavier said. “It depends on how you define torture. This was one of the devices to make you who you are.”

Scott encircled the equipment, noting the dust and age of the devices. “This stuff looks old,” he said.

“Of sorts,” Xavier replied.

“What did it do?”

“They designed it to reset memories. It’s a reason the program was so successful,” he said. “If the agents didn’t know about it, or their capabilities, they were less likely to be noticed. And if anyone did, they wouldn’t be able to share information about it, regardless of the torture technique our enemies exposed them to.”

Scott shook his head. “This is unbelievable,” he said.

Xavier gave a wry smile. “I’ll spare you the rooms where they put it to the test.”

“Shit! Really?”

“Well, they had to be sure, Mr. Harris. Everything from traditional waterboarding to ancient medieval atrocities. It was all done for the sake of the program.”

“It sounds sick, is what it sounds like.”

“Perspective, Mr. Harris.”

Outside the room, Scott asked, “If I’m some sleeper agent, what the hell was I supposed to do?”

Xavier clapped his hands together as he rounded a corner and clanged down another set of stairs. “Oh, what *weren’t* you tasked to do! Eliminate foreign dignitaries, execute local political leaders, de-

stroy royal families... The mission set was extensive and all-encompassing.”

“So, our government created all this to keep the nation safe?”

Xavier inhaled through clenched teeth. “Not exactly. This was all created by a foreign government backed by unknown private investors. People who thought the world should be a different place. Who they were exactly, I haven’t been able to figure out. However, from the research I have done, I know they called themselves *The Circle*.”

“This is ridiculous. I don’t feel like some sort of secret agent, lying in wait for the signal to go and kill someone.”

Xavier laughed. “What? You think *Identity* did everything you’ve done? You did all those things, Mr. Harris. The app was merely a way to ease you out of your sleeper state, to help you remember who you really are. It’s just that you’re taking longer than the others.”

“You know, I seem to recall a time you told me to *stop* using the app.”

“True, Mr. Harris. I did that because you were experiencing something none of the others had. I’m not sure why that’s the case, not even sure it’s important. The fact is you ignored that instruction and here we are.”

“How long has it been? I mean, if what you say is true, how long have I been waiting for the signal to act?”

“It’s difficult to say. A lot of the records were destroyed some time ago, and what I did find I needed to piece together.”

“Well then, why now?”

Xavier stopped at a set of double doors. “Because there is a war brewing, Mr. Harris. Agents were being woken in numbers, given orders that could lead to the destruction of all civilization.”

“Why would The Circle do that? Why destroy the planet?”

“Because it wasn’t The Circle who initiated the orders.”

“Who then?”

“That is something I will tell you later.”

Scott sighed. “At least tell me why they’re after you.”

“Because I’ve done this.” He pushed on the doors and ushered Scott inside.

The interior was gloomy. Dampness encircled him and mildew attacked his nose. Under some spotlights, Maxine danced around a boxing ring. Her MMA gloved hands were up, protecting her head, as she shuffled towards her opponent. He was six-foot everything and solidly built. Tattoos snaked around his arms. Sweat collected on his bald head and dripped from his beard. Muscles contracted as he protected himself from blow after blow from Maxine.

In the corner of the room, a woman sat on a bench with a myriad of weapons laid out on the table. Blindfolded, she field-stripped and reassembled an MP5 with incredible efficiency. Scott knew nothing about guns, regardless of his escapades, other than the damage that could be done. Even when he came out of the app, he could remember using weapons, yet had no recollection of how. When the woman had reassembled the rifle, she removed her blindfold, inspected her handiwork, and repeated the process. Everything about her, much like Maxine, was a ruse. Her long black hair and soft features were designed to deceive.

No one bothered to stop their activities for their new guest.

Xavier stepped in front of Scott.

“If we are going to stop this war from even getting off the ground, we need to fight fire with fire. These are your fellow sleeper agents that I’ve been able to locate. In the ring with Maxine, is Jacob.”

As he said this, Jacob connected with the side of Maxine’s head. Instead of falling to the canvas, she performed a cartwheel, kicking Jacob squarely in the jaw. Jacob backed away, slightly dazed. Xavier clapped.

“They built everyone on solid foundations,” Xavier said. “But they all have their specialties. Maxine, for instance, is adept at long-

range target elimination and psychoanalysis. Jacob's is explosives and destruction."

"What about her?" Scott said, pointing.

"That's Charlotte. Weapons and comms."

"And mine?" Scott asked.

"Espionage and analytics."

"Really? All that cool stuff, and I get stuck with analytics. Weapons. Explosives. No! I get fucking analytics."

"Sorry, Mr. Harris. I didn't oversee the assignment of skill."

"So, you were in charge of the 'Sleeper' unit then?"

Xavier smiled. "No. I wasn't on the payroll here."

"What were you doing here, then?"

"I was one of the experiments."

Chapter 14

“What experiment?” Scott continued to ask.

Xavier had gathered the agents together to introduce the newest member of their team. Maxine and Jacob leaned over the top rope, and Charlotte had left her weapons laid out on the table in pieces to join the group.

“Everyone, this is Scott. Scott, this is everyone,” Xavier announced.

“So, you guys are like me?”

“No,” Maxine said. “We’ve remembered everything. You? You’re a bomb ready to go off, which is dangerous. And until that happens, you’re damn useless, which is also pretty dangerous.”

“I saved your asses with those helicopters.”

“You also caused those helicopters to find us. So, I give you a pass mark.”

“Pass mark?”

“Barely,” she whispered.

Jacob howled. “God damn, that’s a burn.”

“Mr. Harris,” Xavier started. “Why don’t you jump into that ring and answer your critics.”

Charlotte clapped her hands. “Finally, some entertainment!”

Scott thought back to her fighting style against Jacob when he first entered and knew he wouldn’t last ten seconds in the ring with her.

“Listen, I appreciate getting invited into this little superhero club you’ve got going on, but Xavier’s chosen me for a reason. I don’t need to prove myself to anyone.”

“Oh, yes you do,” Xavier proclaimed. “We need to be ready at all times, Mr. Harris. They will find us eventually, and when they do,

they'll stop at nothing. They won't be reasoned with, Scott. You can't talk them down. They will kill you... exterminate all of us. We are standing in their way." He pointed to the ring. "So, get up there, and show us all what you are truly capable of."

Scott looked over the expectant faces and felt he had little choice in the matter. Even a large grin had spread over Xavier's face.

"Listen, I'm not going to hit a—"

"Don't you fucking say it!" Maxine blasted from the ring.

Charlotte marched up to him, stood an inch away from his face. "Trust me, Maxine could kill you in fifty different ways in less than five seconds if she wanted to. And if she did, I'd fuck up your dead body before your brain shut down."

Scott backed away, his heart thumping in his chest.

"You'd better be right about this," he said to Xavier. "Right about me."

"Given everything you've done, Mr. Harris, I do not doubt at all. It is *you* that needs to be right about this."

Scott pulled himself up to the edge of the ring among an echoed applause by Charlotte. Jacob separated the ropes to allow Scott easy entry, finally handing over his gloves before departing. He jumped down next to Charlotte.

"Wish we had some popcorn for the show," he said.

"Beer," Charlotte replied. "Lots of beer."

Scott stood in the middle of the ring and pulled on the gloves. He looked to Xavier. "What are the rules?"

"The rules are simple. Anything goes. If you tap out, you lose." He tapped the canvas. "And Maxine, go easy on him."

Maxine shadowboxed a deadly combination of a jab, cross, and hook, so fast that Scott lost track of the gloves. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Come on. Come to me. Let's get a little crazy in here.* He opened his eyes just in time to see a glove rush towards his

face. Flinching, Maxine's hand connected firmly with his face and he stumbled back towards the ropes.

"You must always be ready, Mr. Harris," Xavier coached. "Out there, in the real world, attacks could come from anyone at any time."

Scott wiped his nose and the absence of blood surprised him. He punched his gloves together and held his hands up as he moved forward. He had seen the movies, knew what to do in principle. Even though he was shitting his pants, he knew Xavier wouldn't let his opponent hurt him... would he?

He threw a wet haymaker in her direction. She dodged it easily and stepped to the side, launching a roundhouse kick to his jaw. Scott fell to his knees instantly, groaning like a cat on heat. Cheers erupted from the sidelines, with Jacob and Charlotte sharing a high-five.

Maxine stood over her downed opponent.

"What the fuck was that?" Scott yelled through a clenched jaw.

"Anything goes!"

She motioned to Xavier. "Listen, this is a waste of time. Maybe get one of your devices on him and then we can have a real—"

Scott drove into her from his position on the canvas, the contact lifting her off her feet. They landed together in a tangle of bodies.

"Always be prepared," Xavier yelled.

Scott got up on his knees, clenched his eyes shut and punched as hard and fast as he could. He didn't know if he was hitting her or the canvas; if he was winning or making an ass of himself.

The next thing bamboozled him. One second, he was on top, wailing on her, the next he was sitting up and she was behind him. And he couldn't breathe. She had gotten an arm around his neck without him even realizing. Blackness developed at the edges of his vision.

"Fight, Mr. Harris. Find the Fight!" Xavier yelled over the cheering.

He tapped her arm repeatedly. Nothing. No relief. Eyelids grew heavy.

“Come on, Mr. Harris. It’s in there, let it out!”

More tapping. No oxygen. Blackness.

Scott gasped and slowly opened his eyes. He lay on his side on the canvas. Picture contorted. Lights swirled. Sound pivoted off the z-axis.

“Congratulations, Mr. Harris. You are dead,” Xavier said solemnly.

“In record time, too,” Charlotte added. “Wouldn’t even have had time to finish my beer.”

“I thought you told Maxine to take it easy,” Scott garbled. He wasn’t even sure of the words he was saying.

“She *was* taking it easy,” Jacob answered.

“Get him up,” Xavier instructed.

Maxine and Jacob helped Scott to his feet and pushed him against the top rope. It was then that he noticed everyone was standing in the ring. Xavier approached, looking over his entire body.

“I just don’t understand,” Xavier said. “I thought for sure this would have done the trick. Surely the trauma would’ve shaken something loose that the technology missed.” He rubbed his eyes. “The app isn’t always going to be there to save you, Mr. Harris. You need to dig deep and remember your training.”

“What do you want to do?” Maxine asked.

Xavier paced across the canvas, deep in thought, while the others watched. After careful consideration, he stopped. “We carry on as planned. Mr. Harris here will just have to play catch up.”

“Bag’s not my problem,” Charlotte said.

“Nor me,” Jacob followed.

They looked at Maxine. She half-closed her eyes as she stared at the others and sighed. “Fine. I’ll take the newbie.” She turned to Scott. “But if you get in my way, or slow me down, or don’t do what I tell you, I’ll just put a bullet into you myself and tell everyone the other guys did it.”

Scott looked at everyone else. “That might be hard to pull off, given you’ve just told everyone.”

“Try me,” she said with venom. “Besides, I can be awfully persuasive.”

“Yeah,” Charlotte added. “Especially when she’s got a sniper rifle zeroed in between your eyes.”

Scott looked to Xavier for support but found none there.

“Just try to keep up,” Xavier said.

“I think I’ve been—.”

Alarms rang out and shredded every floor of the facility.

Scott observed everyone departing the ring and going about their routine. Obviously, they had been training for this event, and the alarms didn’t faze them as much as following a pre-defined plan of action.

Xavier pulled out his device.

“We have breaches on the surface,” he called out from the center of the boxing ring. “Damn, that was fast. Too fast.”

Another shrill alarm.

“Make that two breaches... and one through the submarine docking channel. You all know what to do and where to go.”

“And where the hell’s that?” Scott said, pulling off his gloves.

“The only way we’re getting off this damn island in one piece.”

Chapter 15

Scott trailed the group out of the gym. Charlotte took point, brandishing her MP5. An M4 was slung over her back. She had shoved various handguns into hip and leg holsters, as well as in the back of her pants. Next in line was Xavier, who paid closer attention to his screen than where he was going. Scott figured Xavier knew every inch of the facility, and he was using whatever was on his screen to avoid whoever was attacking them.

“Make sure you detonate everything the moment we’re on the shuttle,” Xavier commented over his shoulder.

“The ball is in play,” Jacob yelled.

Scott noticed Jacob had a heavy bag in one hand, and a small silver canister he held with the other. His thumb pressed down on the top of the device, activating the dead man’s switch on the detonator.

“Shit, is that what I think it is?” Scott murmured.

Maxine ignored the question as she adjusted the rifle sniper that was slung across her back. “Just keep up, newbie.” She armed the M16 in her hands. “I’ll do my best to make sure you get on the shuttle in one piece. You don’t want to be here when the charges detonate.”

Scott felt out of place and entirely useless, and wondered if worse came to worst, they would drop the dead weight in order to save the rest; for the greater good. He was sure any of them would put their life on the line for Xavier, however, he was just coming to terms with what he was. Or more correctly, what Xavier *thought* he was. Despite everything that had happened, he still had doubts about the entire concept. Secret bases. Clandestine programs. A posse of rogue agents led by a mysterious man. It sounded like a bad Hollywood screenplay that had no chance of making it to the big screen.

The team made it to the stairwell. Charlotte, with her rifle against her shoulder, efficiently considered every available angle, before leading the group down to a lower level.

Scott patted down his pockets, hoping to find a device and some earplugs. Finding nothing, he tapped Maxine on the shoulder.

“Pst. Hey.”

She stopped at the top of the stairs. “I’m a little busy here,” she said as she moved her weapon in a wide arc to check their six.

“I was just thinking if I could have a gun as well.”

“If you don’t get down those stairs in the next second, I’m going to throw you over the railing.”

Scott carefully worked his way down the steps. The fact he wasn’t wearing any shoes meant he made little sound. It also meant it wasn’t the most comfortable of adventures for him.

“I’m just sayin’,” he whispered over his shoulder. “I would feel better with a gun.”

“Shut up,” she responded briskly.

On the next level, Xavier placed a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder and she stopped, holding a fist in the air. She trained her weapon on the dark crevices and every open doorway. Xavier then signaled over her shoulder and she silently led the group down a gloomy passageway.

Behind them, impossible to say what level, there was a noise. Scott flinched, and he gasped. It could have been a boot on a walkway. It might have been a gun hitting the handrail. To everyone else, those were two distinct noises. To Scott, it was all a cacophony of panic. His heart was already beating at an incredible pace, and it felt like it was in his throat.

Out the other side of the passageway and into another dimly lit corridor, the team hugged the wall. Scott skipped behind Jacob, trying his best to keep up with the others. Of course, he would always have Maxine to push him forward if he lagged too much. With Jacob

being such a big unit, Scott's only view was across an expanse of multiple walkways and doors.

Scott felt something being thrust into his hands.

"Here," Maxine said. "Take this. Just in case."

Scott looked at it as he padded forward.

"Be careful," she added. "The safety's off."

Another sound, this one somewhere in front of the group, and Scott released an inconsiderable amount of piss into his pants. Xavier pointed down, and Charlotte took the group down the nearest set of stairs. Single file. Charlotte out in front, her finger on the trigger, just itching to fire it, an arsenal strapped to the rest of her body. Xavier guiding through the maze of walkways and stairs. Jacob, his finger on the dead man's switch that would destroy the facility and every living organism in it. Maxine at the rear, ensuring no one would sneak up behind them.

At the bottom of the stairs, something in Scott's periphery stole his attention. He didn't know what it was. It could have been nothing. He noted one of the room doors was ajar. Suddenly the room light flickered on, bright and new, casting a healthy glow over the black dentist chair. He peeled off from the conga line. He couldn't help it. It was mesmerizing. Maxine mustn't have noticed, because she didn't say anything. In fact, Scott couldn't hear anything.

Scott watched a young man, dressed in foreign military fatigues, climbing onto the chair. It was a strange feeling for Scott. He was looking at himself, he was sure of it, yet he had no recollection of the event. Doctors with white lab coats rushed around the room, checking equipment and attaching devices to the body.

"Hey," Maxine whispered. "Get back here!"

Scott turned as he pointed to the room. "Do you see this?"

"See what?" she hushed as she walked over.

A swath of bullets broke the silence and carved the space between them, creating a series of hot flashes. Each ran in the opposite

direction away from potential death. Maxine quickly retreated to the others, holding a position under cover and returning fire to an unseen enemy. She waited there and eyed Scott hastily taking off down a dark passageway.

Heavy machine gun fire tore up the wall beside her and she backed away, weapon raised. She rued that she had to look after Scott. Regretted telling him he would be fine. Sorry that she said she'd get him on the shuttle in one piece.

When the bullets struck, Scott's instinctive flight defense kicked in. He ran for the nearest passageway, to get as far away from the danger as possible. He stole a quick glance at the room just before he ducked his head through an opening, only to find the light had been extinguished, the room returning to obscurity.

He didn't know where he was going, only that he had to keep moving. No idea where the shuttle was that Xavier spoke of, nor even where he was at that moment. No device he could plug in and take him away to a fantasy world. The only thing he had was the weighty pistol Maxine had thrust into his hands.

Gripping a handrail, he went down a level, then across, then up a few, and again back down. With heightened senses and brain working overtime, he had lost track where he was. Every floor looked the same, with a series of walkways and doors, dark passageways and interconnecting walkways. He kept moving, trying to outsmart his pursuers, if, in fact, they were pursuing him. But in the back of his mind, he thought about the device Jacob was carrying, along with the ominous warning from Maxine: *You don't want to be here when the charges detonate.* Around each corner, he expected to meet one an insurgent, or for Jacob to blow the charges. Either would mean certain death.

Holding the pistol out in front of himself he silently descended more staircases. Every noise made him spin or change direction. He was dangerously lost, his anxiety at fever pitch. At one point, he contemplated turning the gun on himself however knew he wouldn't have the courage to pull the trigger. A thought stuck with him. If the others had made it to the shuttle, whatever that was, why they hadn't detonated the explosives, sending the facility, and everything in it, to an irrecoverable end?

On one level, in a dark corner, among a series of unusual sounds, she heard a noise. Keeping it in focus, he backed into a dark room. Squatting on his haunches, he eased the door closed. In the purple shadows of the room, he saw another one of the dental-type chairs, felt a strange internal connection that he could only imagine what a parent felt for a child. Then he felt something else.

Something cold and hard.

Against his head.

And he stopped breathing.

Chapter 16

“I fucking told you to keep up,” Maxine whispered.

Scott let out a long sigh. “Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me. What are you doing here?”

“Saving your ass.”

Scott could make out her approximate features in the gloom.

“Did the others make it?”

“Not sure. There are fuckers all over this place. I’d like to think they did. I’d also like to think that *if* they did, we’d be dead right now.”

“What the fuck are we going to do?”

“Number one on the list is not to die. Number two on the list is to get the hell out of here.”

“Is there a second shuttle we can take?”

Despite the near-zero light, he could tell she shook her head. “No,” she confirmed.

“So how the hell do we get out of here?”

“We go to the one place they won’t expect.”

“Where’s that?”

“We go up.”

“Are you serious?”

“Quietly. Without making any contact.”

It seemed as if she was. “Listen, I don’t know if I’m up for this. Maybe you should go on without me, or better yet, I could cause a distraction or something. Maybe lure a bunch somewhere while you make a getaway.”

“Don’t go playing all hero on me just yet, Scott. There’s plenty more time for that. Besides, I didn’t hang around just so I could throw you to the wolves.”

“Xavier told you to stay behind?”

“I volunteered. Xavier believes in you. So should I. He hasn’t been wrong yet.”

“Really? Given my latest performance?”

“Maybe this next one is all you need.”

Maxine edged to the door.

“Hey,” Scott whispered. “How did you make that noise happen over the other side of the walkway?”

She turned. “What noise?”

“It’s just that—.”

“Shh.”

Scott trained his hearing. Boots on walkways. Indistinct chatter. Foreign language, couldn’t tell which.

“How long before they give up and go home?”

“They don’t give up,” she replied briskly. “If they think there is something or someone here that can help them track Xavier down, then they will search for it until they find it.”

“What are our chances of making it out of this one?”

“Depends on how you look at it. Our chances are better out there than sitting here in the dark waiting for them to find us.”

“And how many levels do we need to climb?”

“Only fourteen.”

“How are we going to go up fourteen levels without being seen?”

“Trust me.”

Maxine silently secured the door behind her. They stood in a dark, narrow concrete hallway. To their right, solid steps curved up and away out of sight. To the left, the descended into an ominous inky blackness.

“I’ll need you to watch our backs,” Maxine said. “Just watch your footing. I don’t want to have to carry you out of here as well.”

She thrust her rifle into her shoulder, adjusted the angle, and started marching up the stairs. Scott followed, the handgun wavering behind them in the darkness.

“Where are we?”

“This is the outer shell. Both walls are four-foot-thick concrete and steel, which should muffle any noise we make.”

The thought that the ocean was just beyond the outer wall made Scott feel queasy.

“And because it curves around the exterior,” Maxine continued, “it’s not the most direct route. But if you want to avoid the pain of a firefight, you’ve got to take the long way round. Provided we don’t run into anyone, or if they don’t know about it, this should be a fairly easy trip topside.”

The journey was long and arduous. They slowed just before every platform and remained out of sight around the curve and checked for any noise or movement. Scott’s legs burned, and he sat on a stair and look down the stairs below them. Shadows moved within shadows, and he convinced himself his mind was playing tricks on him. A mixture of exhaustion and imagination was taking its toll on his body and mind.

“How much longer is there to go?” Scott asked.

“Do you want that answer in levels, distance, or time?” she fired back.

“I’ll take anything at this stage.”

“The answers are four, a couple of kilometers, and fucked if I know. In that order. I trust that’s sufficient.”

Scott nodded, and the pair resumed their journey in silence, save for the padding of boots and feet on concrete, and the occasional whispered groan.

They stopped on the last platform. There were no more stairs, although a different realization had hit Scott. They were at the surface,

which meant they were close to getting off the iceberg and away from the danger.

“How’re the legs?” Maxine asked.

“Completely fucked. Why?”

“Because when we go through that door, there is no going back. And the nearest transport could be at the other end of the strip. Which means we may need to double-time it.”

Scott knew what that meant. His legs felt like jelly, but he knew what adrenalin could do for the body. He’d heard all the stories about people lifting cars off babies and all that shit. Figured sprinting across a tarmac was the same thing. How he wished for a device at that moment, something to help him get through it.

“Whatever happens to me out there,” Maxine said. “Promise me you’ll just keep going.”

“How the hell am I supposed to promise that. I’m not you.”

“No,” she responded. “You’re you. So, anytime you want, feel free to kick in those damn combat skills.”

She eased the metal handle down, and the door unsealed with a whispered gasp. A shaft of light flooded them, and they had to back away until their eyes adjusted. Once Maxine had corrected her vision, she took in the task at hand. Looking over her shoulder, Scott noted they were in one of the sheds at the northern end of the runway he noted when he arrived. Beyond the large, open double doors, he saw their ride to freedom. Some breed of vertical take-off aircraft. The dark green body was squat, like a helicopter, yet had wings. At either tip, large rotors pointed to the sky. It was absent of any markings.

“You can fly that thing?” Scott asked excitedly.

Maxine shrugged. “I’m a fast learner.”

Yet, despite Maxine’s response, it somehow filled him with renewed vigor. A new lease of life washed over him, and his thoughts

on survival exploded. Two hundred meters is all it would take. Then they'd be away from that place and the people who had attacked it.

"Just like everything else," she said. "We'll take this in stages. First, we'll get to the door. Once I confirm it's clear to do so, I'll signal us towards the Valor."

"Is that what it's called? Valor?"

"It is today."

With the butt of the rifle once again against her shoulder, and with her sights trained, she moved towards their freedom, and out of the cover of the tunnel. Scott followed closely behind; pointing his handgun in every direction. They wedged themselves behind some barrels just short of the door, with Scott resting on his haunches beside Maxine.

"So far, so good," he said.

"So far," she repeated. "Once we get—."

She didn't get a chance to finish the sentence. The butt of a rifle flew from the shadows and struck Maxine in the side of the head. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she crumpled unconscious onto the polished concrete ground.

Maxine's words played in his head at triple speed. *Keep going.* Scott bolted from his position towards the aircraft. He clenched his eyes shut, waiting for the bullets to strike his back and cut him down. His mind was a jumble. He was alone. No app. No backup. No Xavier coming to rescue him as he did at the police station merely days before. All he had was covert operation training that refused to show itself, an aircraft he didn't know how to operate, and a hundred meters of open ground to get to it.

As he crossed the invisible barrier between shade and sunlight, something heavy hit him in the chest. The impact took his legs out from under him and the time he spent floating in the air felt like an eternity. He speculated what had hit him and contemplated what it would feel like when he landed. Then he did. His body came to

a skidding halt on the tarmac. Skin burned. Blood flowed. He just wanted to lay there in the sun for an hour. But *they* had other plans.

Hands picked him up and thrust him against the shed wall.

“Where is he?” they said. His voice was so familiar that Scott couldn’t place it.

He looked at the eyes through the holes of the balaclava. They were superior, all-knowing. They pulled him away before thrusting him hard against the wall, resulting in Scott banging the back of his head.

“Where?” they repeated.

Scott tried to speak, but he didn’t know what to say, primarily because he didn’t know the answer.

The attacker slowly pulled off his balaclava.

Scott’s eyes went wide. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The voice. The tone. Every last detail he remembered was identical. But it was impossible. How could it be? He thought he had somehow ventured into his fantasy world for a split second. Yet it was there in front of him, as real as anything he had ever experienced.

The man pulled out a handgun and pressed it to the side of his head.

“Where is he?!” the man demanded. “Tell me where Xavier is.”

“But... but...”

His fingers were numb.

The man’s eyes burned deep into his soul.

He couldn’t breathe.

Shaved head, but there was no mistake.

He was looking directly at Xavier.

And then the hands of unconsciousness dragged him under.

PROXIMITY

“Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.”

T. S. Eliot

“Don’t mistake proximity with loyalty.”

Unknown

Chapter 17

One week earlier

Xavier tightened his grip around the man's neck. The assailant had been easy enough to spot through the mass of airport patrons. He looked just like him, after all. Besides, it was something Xavier accepted when locating a Sleeper, yet unsettled him just the same. The others always seemed to be a few steps ahead, and if he hadn't moved quickly, the target would encounter death.

That was their game now. It used to be seduction, luring Sleepers into a false state of security, edging them out of their hiding places. But not anymore. They called for a more blunt and brutal form of planned execution.

Xavier followed the man into one of the many male bathrooms along the concourse. The bathroom selected wasn't random, nor was their intention when they got there. Purpose drove the man.

The man entered the stall next to the target, and suddenly the countdown timer was on. Xavier followed the man into the stall, quickly encasing the man with his limbs before he reacted to his presence. With one arm around his neck and the other muffling groans, Xavier tightened his chokehold on the man. Squeezing life.

To the tune of retching from the next stall, the intertwined bodies banged against the stall walls, the man attempting to rid his attacker and nullify the potent attack. The man fought for air, tried to prize the arm away from his neck, to find some solace from the banging in his head. He could feel the blackness coming for him, feel the mission sliding from his grasp.

All the attempts were to no avail. Once Xavier had started the attack, it would only end one way. It was the man or Xavier, and the latter just wouldn't be acceptable. Perhaps if the others knew what Xavier knew, they would have sent more people. The target was more important than they gave him credit for. It was obvious to Xavier they hadn't found that out yet. He hoped they never would.

The man slowly gave up the fight, surrendering to the lack of oxygen. Xavier held on a little longer, needed to ensure the man was unconscious, if not dead. He made sure of it by twisting the man's neck sharply, a sickening crack signaling the conclusion of their contest. Xavier always found it easier to break a neck when the victim wasn't struggling.

Another vomit from the next stall, more dispelling of stomach contents, followed by a flush and a lackadaisical opening of the stall door. Xavier propped the man's body on the toilet. Then deftly slid under the partition to the neighboring empty stall. He waited for a moment, patted down his disheveled hair and clothes, and steadied himself. This wasn't his first target, but was the most important. That would come to be realized soon.

Xavier flushed and kicked open the door and marched to the sink.

Chapter 18

One week later

Scott stirred. Groaned from clenched jaw. Last memories replayed continuously behind his eyelids. Relentlessly. Maxine rendered unconscious by the butt of a rifle from an unseen attacker. Running. Closer to the aircraft. But then what? He didn't know. Just knew he needed to get there. And then a hit in the chest that took his legs out. That moment of weightlessness that felt like it could have gone on forever. Harsh reality when his ass found the deck. Shouting. Threats. A gun. Then Xavier. Looked like Xavier. Exactly like him. But different. An alternate version? Then blackness. Pause. Rewind. Replay. Over. And over.

Tiredness seeped from his pores. Out of breath from running. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Bobbing up and down in the surf. Hands pulling him under. Boot on his head. Couldn't see who it belonged to. Not above the waves long enough to capture enough precious oxygen. Light cut through numerous frothy peaks. Burning lungs. Couldn't hold it any longer. Needed to suck in. Human nature. The body's fight mechanism. Happening. Couldn't stop it. Then...

Scott gasped. Groaned. Wet face. Persistent water washing over him, splashing on the ground. The sound of his heartbeat crashing in his ears.

"Enough!" The voice ripped through the torrent.

Then it stopped. The weight lifted from his face. He coughed, spluttered. Like an old engine slowly turning over. Clearing out the dusty carburetor. Tried very hard to catch his breath. Shook the wa-

ter from his face, spat out whatever was in there. Opened his eyes and saw people around him, but they seemed upside down.

His view shifted. Body changed position, tilted upright. A face rose up under bright lights, was like staring into the sun. Burned his skin, melted his eyeballs. Clenched eyes shut. Couldn't turn away.

"Welcome back."

The voice was gloomy, yet soothing. Like a jazz singer crooning against a backdrop of trumpet and base in a smoke-filled club at two in the morning. He had never frequented such an establishment. His wife had forbidden it. She didn't like the smell of smoke or booze, so he stayed away from both. Which was fine, because the scene didn't fit his frugal lifestyle. But she was dead. And he had the rest of his life ahead of him. At least, he thought he did.

He tried to move but found himself sufficiently restrained. Inch thick leather straps over his wrists and ankles. Similar fastenings over his forehead. He was naked. Felt ocean air waft around his unclothed body. Exposed. Humiliated.

"What do you want?" Scott gasped. He continued to squint at the ball of light.

Then that too went away, even though he could still see it in the darkness. The afterimage imprinted on his retinas.

"Where is the one you call Xavier?"

"I... I don't know."

"Again!" The voice ordered. It was militaristic. Unyielding.

Immediately, he tilted back. They pushed a wet towel over his face and the water cascaded over him. Continuous splashing. No oxygen. He shook and shuddered in the chair. Shouted. Willed for it all to be over. Reflex. Breathed in water. Coughed. Choked. Repetition. Lost count of the seconds. Felt like an hour. Then it ended, and the device they had strapped him to righted again, forcing him once more into the searing light.

"Where is the one you call Xavier?"

“I... I’ll say anything you want. I’ll do anything!”

“Where is he?”

“They went to the shuttle.”

“Where is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Again!”

The torturous process repeated. Tilt. Water. Couldn’t breathe. Heart raced. An attack was coming, he could feel it. Chest crackled. Lungs burned. Reprieve came before death did. He wouldn’t have minded—he wished for something to ease the pain.

Scott tilted upright again, mumbled all the way towards the bright orb.

“I’ll tell you anything... say anything... anything you want...”

“Where is the shuttle?”

“I... I’ll tell you anything.”

“Where is the shuttle?”

“Anything.”

“Cables!” the voice shouted.

Through the haze, Scott felt a sharp pain on his nipples. Clamps felt like they were being screwed on. The dull throb turned into a sharp bite as electricity hit him unexpectedly. He bucked in the chair, teeth clenched, breath held until it passed. Pain subsided for the enduring spike in his chest. Then another jolt, and another. Random intervals for arbitrary amounts of time. The perpetual process wore him down. He struggled to make any coherent thought. A jumble of sparks raced around his head, and he whimpered as he waited for the next lightning bolt to hit him.

“Where is it?”

“It’s here,” Scott mumbled. “It must be here... We were here... We were all here... But then we got separated... I don’t know where he went... I’ll say anything you want... Anything... Everything... Please...”

“Shears!”

Metallic scraping noises rung in Scott's ears. The *schick* of blades opening and closing echoed.

"Please," Scott garbled. "Anything. His name is Xavier. That's all I know. Please."

A slap across his face, a thwack that raised him from his ramblings and into the room. Light danced with the shadows. Figures moved back and forth. A man standing in front of him. Another person beside him. Heard the shears open. Felt the cold steel against his limp penis.

Breath caught in throat. *Fuck*. The threat turned his brain from mush to an extravaganza of firing neurons.

"I want you to be conscious when we do this," the man said. "Now, I will count back from three. When I get to zero, if you haven't told me, you will lose your cock. Now, I should tell you, there are no second chances, and we can only play this little game once. So, if you value your manhood, you'll start talking. Unless you're one of these people who suggests you don't need a dick to be a man, so be it. I don't care either way. I just want information. And you will tell me what I want to know."

"Yes," Scott yelled. "I'll fucking say whatever you want. My name is Scott. Xavier found me in an airport bathroom. Put an app on my phone. Then he—"

"Where does the shuttle go?"

"Um, he's an entrepreneur... or a lawyer... or something."

"Two."

"He... he's assembling people. Um. Shit. Something about a war. He's got an army. Shit!"

"One."

"No! Fuck. I'm an agent. A sleeper agent. I think. Please. I don't know anything else."

"Zero."

The blades scraped together without further warning. The noise
echoed in his ears.

Then blackness.

Then nothing.

Chapter 19

Scott slowly roused with the taste of vomit in his mouth and waft of urine in his nostrils. Salty air stuck in his dry throat. The gray room distorted like a wave. A crackle in the transmission. Numbness had crawled its way up to his torso so he could no longer feel his legs. Tried moving. Still restrained. Thought about the shears, his dick between the blades... waiting. Wanted to look down. Imagined the damage. Pictured grotesque imagery. Could feel bile rising in his throat.

The table shifted and once more he was being lifted towards the light. It extinguished when he reached the peak, light fading to black. Then overhead lights came on and room illuminated. Scott could sense others around him and noted some swift movements in his periphery vision.

A silhouette filled his vision, his eyes still adjusting to their environment.

“Who are you, Scott Harris?”

Scott tried to talk, but his voice came out like a bag of sawdust. Swallowed.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Scott gasped, his eyes flickering, struggling with consciousness.

“No, stay with me, Scott.”

His vision slowly cleared. The colors sluggishly returned, washing over the monotone. The captor’s face started to sharpen, bold lines, definition returning to a blob of flesh. When the face fully formed, Scott blinked wildly.

“It can’t be,” Scott breathed. “You... You look like him.”

A smile perched on the man’s face.

“You,” Scott continued, his eyes roaming the facial landscape, investigating the area like he was surveying a new country. “Apart from your hair, you look identical to Xavier.”

“Oh, I know,” the man replied, running a hand over his slicked back dirty blonde hair.

“How? How can this be? What’s going on? I don’t understand.” And then a memory struck him. Maxine knocked unconscious. Running towards the aircraft. Sunshine within reach. Legs taken out from under him. Thrust against a wall. The revelation. A bald Xavier. “How?” Scott pleaded. “How many of you are there?”

“We will come to that, Scott. But there are more pressing matters to attend to. We need to find Xavier.”

And then Scott remembered. He can’t believe he forgot.

“Oh god, what about my penis? Fuck, fuck, fuck. Am I going to die?”

The man reached up and released the strap covering Scott’s head.

“See for yourself.”

The pressure release was astounding. He immediately flung his head forward. Beyond his flat chest and slight paunch, there was his penis, in all its shriveled glory. At first, he didn’t believe it and refocused his eyes a few times just to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing.

“I don’t understand,” Scott said. “Not that I’m complaining. I’m kind of attached to my dick.”

The man grabbed Scott by the hair and pulled him back. Sauntered up close to him.

“You’re not like the others, Mr. Harris. Not by a long shot.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

The man stroked Scott’s cheek with the back of his fingers, working them down to run along Scott’s jawline.

“Maxine, well, she was forthright. Tight-lipped. Couldn’t get a word out of her.”

Scott gasped. "Is she okay?"

"Barely, Scott," the man said, looking over every inch of his face as if it held the secrets to his quandary. "She gave us nothing, as her training dictated. As was protocol. In fact, I'm pretty sure if she had the chance, she'd kill herself immediately."

Scott swallowed.

"But you? You aren't like her. You aren't like any of the others."

"So, I keep hearing," Scott said with a wry smile.

"You caved so very quickly."

The smile faded. "I need to use my phone..."

"Ah, yes. The little program Xavier has created. It has caused us much trouble, yet we've been using it to track agents' movements. A blessing and a curse."

Scott looked over the man's features, still taken aback by how similar he was to Xavier. *Brothers? Wait.* With the bald Xavier that grabbed him topside, that made three. *Triplets? Was this some kind of family falling out?*

"Where's Maxine? Is she okay?"

"She's... fine. Just fine."

Then another man appeared. Correction. Another Xavier. Brown hair, neatly parted. But same physique. Identical everything else. Matching black flight suit. He handed the interrogator a tablet who took it, clicked some buttons, swiped across the surface, and gave it back. As the device changed hands, there was a moment they simultaneously looked directly at Scott. Synchronized. Saw the confused and fascinated face of their quarry.

The two identical men looked at each other once more. "Are you sure there is no other way?" the interrogator asked.

"I'm afraid not," came the reply.

A deep breath. Consideration. "How certain are we about this?"

A mumble. Incoherent. Unintelligible. *A foreign language?* It didn't sound like any Scott had heard. Not that he had widely trav-

eled in his life, but even the biggest xenophobe could place an accent somewhere on the planet. Not that one.

The interrogator eventually relinquished and waved the guest away. He turned to Scott and leaned in close.

“I know what you’re thinking, Scott. I could read your mind. Xavier hasn’t told you, has he?”

Scott quickly shuffled through his memory banks for something—anything—Xavier had told him that might allude to exactly what was happening. At the moment, he came up empty.

“I don’t think so,” Scott said.

The man tutted.

“My name is Xander. Myself, along with my brothers, along with Xavier, were born here.”

“You were born at this base? You and Xavier are brothers?”

Xander scratched his cheek. “I’m sorry. I didn’t make myself very clear. I meant to say, they grew us here.”

“Grew? What?” The words just made little sense to him.

“My. He has kept you in the dark, hasn’t he?”

“Well, it’s just that—.”

“I don’t think he trusts you, Scott. And you shouldn’t trust him either.”

Scott stared at him, willed him to continue.

“Xavier is a dangerous man. He doesn’t care about you or the others he is with. He is rogue. We need to stop him before it’s too late. We’re hoping you can help us do that.”

Scott smiled weakly. “I think I’d rather take my chances with the person who hasn’t had my nuts between the blades of a set of shears.”

“We had to be sure, Scott. Had to be sure you were still you. That little program he’s created turns people into minions to undertake his bidding. Tell me, Scott. Have you killed anyone recently?”

He thought back. The numbers were many, but the difference between reality and fantasy was awash with gray, a flexible border that seemed as malleable as putty.

“I guess so,” Scott replied.

“And had you killed anyone before meeting Xavier?”

Scott dropped his head. “No,” he mumbled.

“Do you see? He is making you into something you are not. You’re just lucky that we could get to you before it was too late.”

“No,” Scott said defiantly. “It can’t be. I don’t believe it.”

Scott looked down at the floor. Tried to remember everything Xavier had said to him.

“He said something about a war.”

“Yes. There is. A war *he* started. Do you have any idea what he’s trying to do?”

“No. Well... You’re the bad guys in all this.”

Xander’s features dropped. “I’m sorry, Scott. But that just isn’t true. We need to bring Xavier back into line. He’s gone rogue. Causing damage. Killing people. Ruining lives.”

“Who sent you? Who’s behind all of this bullshit?”

“A conglomerate called The Circle.”

That name struck a chord deep within Scott, and the recognition showed on his face.

“Ah, I see he’s told you some things at least.”

Scott looked away once again.

“Listen,” Xander said. “There’s a lot of money supporting this. We can give you your old life back.”

Scott thought about his dead wife and the murder charge Xavier stole him away from. “I didn’t like my old life.”

“Fine. Fuck it. You can start a fresh one somewhere. Far away from this. With enough cash to see you through a thousand lifetimes. You could go wherever you wanted. Do whatever you wanted. Buy whatever you wanted. Girls. Cars. Drugs. Put the money in a

pool and swim in it like *Scrooge McDuck*. I don't give a shit." Xander sucked in through his teeth. Came even closer to Scott. When he spoke, his voice was low, even... menacing. "What I give a shit about is finding Xavier."

Scott mulled it over. Thought about the death, the mayhem. The blood, the danger. The fantasies, the pain. He looked up to his detainer.

Xander smiled.

Chapter 20

Scott sat on the floor of the room; his knees pulled to his chest. Xander had released him from his restraints and led him to a room with an entourage in tow. They pushed him inside and threw one of their black flight suits at him. He was told to get dressed and wait. That's all they wanted. For him to wait. He was the lure.

In a predictable move, Scott had flinched at the deal. It was compelling enough, more than enough. Money. A new life in a new place. Away from all the madness that had existed the moment he met Xavier. But they wanted him to go to Xavier, get him out in the open, and give him up to Zero Division. Make it easy for them. But he knew he could never pull it off, couldn't even lie that he could. Xavier would see right through him, and he'd be lucky if the mysterious man didn't put a bullet in his brain the instant he caught on.

Xander's smile had faded as quickly as Scott's inability to accept the arrangement. So, they made him the lure, hoping that Xavier might come back for him. Xander told him it was the only reason he wasn't dead. And Scott wholeheartedly believed every word. Had no reason not to believe they wouldn't use the shears to cut off every extremity the steel blades could cut through. Perhaps even those it couldn't.

As he sat in the corner of the darkened room, he thought about Maxine. Last he saw of her was a glimpse of her limp body as he bolted for the aircraft on the runway. He didn't know whether she was dead or alive, whether she divulged critical information or if she held herself together under extreme duress. Xander had threatened to remove his manhood if answers weren't forthcoming... and he had nothing to tell.

Maxine was a different story. She knew things; she must have. Scott shuddered at the thought of what they put her through. But even so, he knew how strong she was, physically and mentally. And he was certain if she had the chance, she'd kick all their asses with little effort.

The icy walls seemed to close in on him. The lights were off and heavy shadows idled over every surface. Scott looked up to the shrouded dental chair that owned the majority of space in the middle of the room. Ominous from his upward angle, threatening from his vantage point. It was another of those rooms, the torture rooms that Xavier mentioned. Devices and exercises, designed to test their training, to make sure it had stuck. Since wedging himself into the corner, he'd thought a lot about what Xavier had told him. Who was he? What was he capable of? Who was lying, Xavier or Xander? Trust seemed to be a currency, and he was from an unfamiliar country. He could neither give nor accept it, and any trade or bargain was off the table.

Beyond the chair, a silhouette in one of the frosted glass panels. An ever-vigilant guard ensuring the prisoner didn't escape. Scott scoffed. He had absolutely no intention of trying to escape. Even if he did, where would he possibly go to? He was stuck inside a man-made island (is what he called it, despite Xavier suggesting it was more of an iceberg), surrounded by thousands of square kilometers of ocean.

Scott traced around the soft outline of the shadowy figure. He was wondering if he too looked exactly like Xavier. Another carbon copy. He was ready to accept Xavier's version of the truth. But then things had changed, had taken a twist he never saw coming. And now he was a prisoner in someone's game, a pawn on the chessboard waiting for someone to move him.

Then everything changed again. The shadow outside the door disappeared. One second, he was there, and then he wasn't. No sound. Nor any other movement. Perhaps he had gone on break

and another would replace him. Which got him thinking how many Xaviers were out there? How big was the war going to get?

The door creaked open. Scott could see the top of it from behind the chair. There was a shuffling noise, then it closed again.

“Hello?”

No reply.

He pushed himself off the ground and peered around the chair. The door was closed, and there was no one there. Maybe someone got the wrong room. Or whoever it was, thought the room was empty. He stopped. Could hear breathing. An ever so soft exhale of breath. Heartbeat vibrations chorused with his own. A smell, the biological makeup of the room had changed. That overwhelming feeling of being watched. That additional sense that something or someone was close.

Sudden movement. A hand over his mouth. Blocking the gasp, a girlish scream from a b-grade horror movie. An arm pulled him down behind the chair. Out of sight. Easy prey. A face in front of his. Eyes wide. Threatening. Obdurate.

When he realized who it was, he threw his arms around their neck.

“Holy shit, Maxine!” he whispered. “I thought you were dead!”

“For some time there, I thought I was.”

He pulled away. Noted her black flight suit.

“What are you doing here? Christ, is this an escape?”

She nodded. “Something like that.”

“Holy fuck. Can we get to Xavier?”

“We don’t need to,” she said. “He’s already here.” She motioned with her head to a corner of the room.

Scott cautiously peered around the chair. Xavier was slumped up against the corner, claret streaming down the side of his face. Strands of chestnut hair stuck to the blood. His arms limp beside the body.

“Holy shit. What happened to him? Is he dead?”

“I most certainly am not!”

The voice startled Scott so much his heart rate jumped to jackrabbit in a millisecond, and he banged his head on the chair. He fell to his side, away from the familiar voice, and shuffled backward as if seeing a ghost.

Xavier came into view. A mop of brown chestnut hair. Black flight suit.

“Jesus Christ,” Scott yelped between pants. “What the fuck is going on here?”

“What do you think this is?” Maxine asked. Rhetorical question.

“We’re getting you out of here, Scott,” Xavier added. “Which means I need you, more than ever, to get yourself together.”

Scott looked over Xavier skeptically. “Why are you wearing one of their suits?”

Xavier looked down. Tugged at it. “This? It’s the perfect cover. I can’t very well come in here wearing flashing lights and an enormous red hat.”

“How do I know it’s you?”

Xavier crouched down. “We met in an airport bathroom where I gave you the Identity application. Some terrible things happened. We engaged in a firefight in the middle of industrial streets. They attacked our helicopter en route to this facility How much do I need to say for you to know it’s me?”

“They said lots of things about you.”

“I bet they did,” countered Xavier.

“They said I couldn’t trust you. That *you* are the one starting the war.”

“Do you believe them?”

Scott looked down. Resigned.

Xavier bit his lip. Disappointment.

“Help us get out of here and I will tell you everything. But we can’t do this without you.”

“They said you *grew* here. What that fuck is that about?”

“Everything,” Xavier repeated. “But we need to get out of here, and to do that we need your help.”

Scott shook his head. “I’m still a no one. A nobody. Whatever you think is inside me, maybe it’s not there. So, what the hell can I do?”

Xavier smiled and held out his hand.

“You can wear these.”

Chapter 21

The trio crouched by the door. Scott rolled the small earbuds around in the palm of his hand. He found it ridiculous that his value relied on the device he was about to connect to his brain. But the alternative didn't sit well with him either. He was sick of being ordinary. Less than ordinary. What the device was, whatever it made him do, it made him feel beyond anything he could remember. He would get his answers from Xavier, and if they didn't live up to the mark, if he thought he was being lied to, he'd run back to the other Xaviers and give them everything.

“Scott!”

Scott shook his head and looked up; a questioning expression on his face.

“Did you hear the plan?” Maxine asked.

Scott opened his mouth. Silence.

“That answers my question. Thank you.” She sighed. “Just let the program do its thing. We really need you on this one.”

Scott nodded, very uncertain how the next hours would turn out. He was told to wait. That he was the bait. And waited he had. He hadn't told them, yet, nothing had happened just the same. He was walking the fence line waiting for the misstep that would force him down a path he couldn't recover from.

Maxine was standing at the door when it suddenly kicked open, the crashing sound enough for Scott to release his bladder. The black-clad guard stepped forward into the entry. Maxine slammed the door on the guard, who released a volley of fire into the room.

Xavier groaned and fell to the side, his hands over his eyes. Scott sank to the floor, covering his head as bullets tore up the interior, causing wood and fabric to fly and float in every direction.

Maxine grabbed the gun with one hand as she continued to slam the door against the guard. She screamed at Scott, but all the noise was colliding into a single effort of clatter that struck him like a brick.

Scott fumbled the devices into his ears, his shaking hands making the process difficult. But he eventually squeezed them into his canals. Just like last time, they seemed to come alive and crawl into his brain, coating his gray matter with a calming ooze.

As the darkness crept over him, he noted Maxine ripping the gun from the guard, smashing his head against the frame, and drop kicking him out of the room.

Machine gun fire ripped the door frame to pieces, sending wood splinters flying in every direction. Maxine wedged her machine gun in the gap and fired relentlessly, blind shots sparking off the interior.

“Nice of you to join us, Scott,” Maxine puffed as she let loose another volley of stray bullets.

Scott unclipped his parachute. “Landing on the roof of Dimitrijevic’s building isn’t a simple thing to accomplish. What the fuck are we doing here, Maxine?”

Maxine squeezed off some more rounds. “Before you killed Dimitrijevic and Miroslav, they had stolen something from the Bolivians. That’s why he needed those guns from you. They were preparing for an onslaught.”

“What did Dimitrijevic get himself into?”

“Intelligence is slim on this information. The thinking is some kind of artifact.”

“Great. He stole a piece of art. So what?”

“Well, the Bolivian’s want it back.”

“So? Let the Bolivian’s get it back.”

Maxine turned. “Look around you, Scott.”

Scott did. Black-clad bodies littered the roof in various states of dismemberment. Between them lay an assortment of body armor and weapons. It was a stark contrast to the cloudless night and silver orb that shone down on them like a personal spotlight. Another round of bullets ripped into the door.

“Besides,” Maxine continued. “Krantz from NCS wants it resolved. Something about a trade deal or something. I can’t remember. I fell asleep.”

“I believe it’s a hostage exchange scenario and political coup that aims to simultaneously bring regional peace and socioeconomic lament,” Woodward said.

Scott turned and did a double take, noting the bandage over his eyes. “Jesus Christ, Woodward. What the hell happened to you?”

“Stray shrapnel,” he declared. “Just a flesh wound, sir. I’ll be just fine.”

“Shit. Maybe best if you sit this one out.”

“No can do,” Maxine piped in. “He’s memorized the path to the bounty.”

“Path?” Scott exclaimed. “We don’t need a path; we just kick some doors in until we find what we’re looking for.”

“Unfortunately, not this time,” Woodward stated. “Before meeting with you, Dimitrijevic booby-trapped the entire building. Open the wrong door and the entire building comes down.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“I intercepted a copy of the plans as they were in virtual transit. Obtained a cursory glance before a virus ate my hard drive.”

“Can you just explain the path to us?” Scott asked.

“How long have you got?”

Maxine fired a few more rounds before the gun clicked dry. “Not long enough,” she said.

“I see. What hardware do we have?” Scott inquired.

“Whatever you see on the roof. Pickings are slim. Most are unreliable black market AK47s redirected from Iran.”

Scott rubbed his hands together. “Okay. Unreliable weapons and a blind man against an army of merciless killers, in a building that may explode at any point, looking for something, and we’re not sure what that something is.”

Scott rubbed his chin. “I like those odds.”

More firepower busting into their barrier.

“Have you got a plan?” Maxine asked.

They looked at each other. Unspoken words. The most powerful there is. They nodded in unison and shifted their attention to Woodward.

“Ah, would anyone mind filling me in on the plan?”

Scott smiled. “You just need to stand very, very still.”

Chapter 22

Scott kicked the remainder of the door in. The loud crack of the wood was replaced with the deafening roar of thunder from multiple machine guns. Bullets bit into the Kevlar and tore into the body, sending it into a shuddering spasm. Many more pinged off multiple surfaces, erupting sparks, the muzzle fire lighting up the stairwell.

With empty clips, the firing ceased. The last of the casings rained down and chimed on the concrete stairwell. The body perched forward and then fell. But something was wrong. Why did it fall forward? And why is it bulkier than usual? Caught in contemplation, they didn't notice until it was too late.

A kneeling Maxine, stock to her shoulder, eye down the sights, let loose with a short barrage of fire. Neat bullet holes formed in the mercenary's foreheads, resulting in them collapsing over each other, their life well and truly vacating their bodies in an instant.

Scott peered around the corner. "Anyone else in there?"

"If there was, they would be dead," Maxine replied, her gaze still on the interior, waiting for any sign of life, any movement that would dictate she needed to kill someone. Nothing.

"Maxine, you take point. Woodward will guide you. I'll bring up the rear."

"That's what she said," Maxine quipped.

"Yes, she did," Scott fired back. "Yes, she did."

The trio quietly descended the internal staircase and carefully through the door at the bottom. Beige corridors stretched out in both directions. Equidistant brown doors filled the walls. Each door had a faded gold number on it. There was no sound, no movement, and boredom quickly set in.

“Jesus,” Scott said taking in the interior. “If I had to live here, I would set off the explosives myself.”

“To the left,” Woodward murmured, ignoring Scott’s jibe.

Maxine led the charge, edging down the corridor, waiting for a soldier to jump out and attack them.

“Stop at the elevator doors,” Woodward instructed.

Maxine stopped at a set of silver doors to her right, yet kept her vision forward. Scott did the same for the corridor they just walked down. Woodward reached out and felt around for the button.

“An elevator?” Scott asked. “Really?”

“When is an elevator not an elevator?” Woodward pondered.

Metallic cranking noises filled the void, and the doors clicked open as a single door. Darkness spilled out into the lit corridor.

“Oh, what a sneaky fucker,” Scott beamed. “Seems like we’re on our way.”

Woodward pushed the door inwards. A shrill alarm filled the hallway, heightening the alertness of the three.

“What the fuck is that?” Scott yelled.

The searing tone of GPS directions entered the cacophony. “*Building detonators armed. Explosions imminent, in... seven... minutes.*”

The alarm died down to a peaceful drone.

“Seven minutes?” Scott scoffed. “Who the hell sets an explosive timer for seven minutes?”

“Oh, I see,” said Woodward. “A clever ruse. Anyone breaking in without knowing the correct path would immediately evacuate.”

Somewhere in the distance, doors opened and slammed again, followed by a barrage of heavy footsteps. Scott and Maxine steadied themselves, waited for an army to rush around the corner and open fire. Out in the middle of the corridor, they were sitting ducks. But they quickly realized the footfalls weren’t coming toward them. They were running *away* from them.

“Are you sure about that assessment?” Maxine asked.

“No,” Woodward said, dropping his head. “I guess not.”

“Well, that gives us seven minutes to find the thing we’re looking for and getting the hell out of here.”

“Actually, six minutes, twenty-six seconds,” Woodward announced. “Twenty-five. Twenty-four.”

“Well get on with it then,” Maxine snarked.

“Well, we go through there.”

Maxine sighed and pushed her way past the door and into the blackness, her gun at the ready. Woodward followed close behind, a hand on her shoulder. Scott took one last look along the corridor in both directions, before backing into the room. The door clicked shut behind him.

Overhead lights clicked on. Beautiful furnishings decorated the small room, with a rustic armchair in one corner, and an antique lamp in the other. They found themselves in the center of a hand-loomed circular rug, contemplating their next move. Three doors greeted them, one embedded in each wall, identical to the doors they passed out in the corridor.

“Left,” Woodward said.

“Left it is,” repeated Maxine. She reached for the door handle and turned the knob.

“I think,” Woodward quickly added.

Maxine stopped. Held her breath.

“What do you mean you think?” Scott asked, coming up to him.

“Well, I’m fairly sure.”

“I thought you said you saw the plans before they destroyed your computer,” Maxine said, looking over her shoulder.

“It was a cursory glance,” Woodward defended. “There was a lot to look at.”

Scott sighed. “How certain are you?”

“I’m not uncertain,” Woodward breathed.

Maxine looked at Scott. He nodded in reply. She held her breath as she turned the handle. The door opened into a dark space. No additional alarm came forth. No impending warning of catastrophic proportions.

Maxine took a step.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Woodward declared.

Maxine paused mid-step.

“Why not?” she asked curiously.

“Because you will struggle to find a floor.”

Holding onto the frame, she found no solid footing.

“A shaft?” Scott asked.

“Yes, like an elevator shaft,” Woodward instructed. “There should be rungs just below the edge.”

Maxine, on hands and knees, found them.

“So, we just climb down? Doesn’t seem that hard,” Scott announced.

“Getting on is easy, getting off is hard.”

“That’s what she said,” Scott quipped again.

No one laughed.

“Oh, come on guys.”

“I’ll laugh when we’re out of here,” Maxine said.

“Hopefully in the next ten minutes or so,” Woodward added.

“Well, we should hurry the fuck up then,” Scott barked.

Maxine slung the machine gun over her shoulder and commenced her decent.

Time seemed to stand still as they climbed into the depths of the impenetrable void. Several times, Scott felt the frigid hands of unconsciousness grab a hold of him, and he wanted nothing more than to release his grip and fall backward into the nothing and let it swallow him whole.

“Stop!” Woodward shouted. “Maxine, to your left, there should be an opening.”

A moment of silence. "I can't see anything."

"You must feel around for it."

Metallic hisses sounded above them.

"Quickly," Scott yelled. "Something is happening up here."

"I'm trying," Maxine snorted, frustration edging on her voice.

"Try harder," Scott yelled. "Whatever it is, it's getting closer."

Then the handhold he had a grasp on pulled back into the shaft, leaving nothing but a smooth surface.

"Shit!" Scott shouted. "Go, go! The rungs are receding into the wall."

Then the next one went, and Scott leaned in, gripping the handhold at his waist.

Maxine frantically descended while scanning the smooth surface next to the rungs for an opening. Woodward misplaced a foot and hung for a moment before regaining his posture, but Scott placed a foot onto a hand.

"Hurry," Scott murmured.

"Found it!" Maxine announced and awkwardly eased down into a short corridor. She blindly reached up and helped Woodward in. The blind leading the blind, literally.

Scott struggled to keep up, his hand rungs quickly disappearing into the shaft wall.

"Where'd you guys go?" he yelled out.

"Down here, a little further," Maxine yelled back.

Then at once, all the ladder rungs clicked back into place, leaving Scott floating in the abyss, his arms flailing as gravity wretched him down.

Chapter 23

Scott screamed as he scratched for purchase on the smooth walls as he sunk deeper into the cavity. Then something grabbed him. His body swung like a pendulum and hit the shaft wall hard.

“Nice of you to drop in,” Maxine said.

“Leave the jokes to me,” Scott scoffed. “But, thank you.”

She hauled him up and into the unlit corridor.

“Woodward,” Scott said. “Nothing on that plan of yours about the ladder rungs disappearing?”

He shrugged in reply. “It was a cursory glance.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Scott said. “Any other surprises we should know about?”

Over an invisible speaker came: *Explosions imminent, in... four... minutes.*

“Just that,” Woodward said, pointing somewhere above him.

“Come on,” Maxine ordered. “Time is running out. And I think I see some light up ahead.”

The group resumed their mission, under the watchful eye of the explosion countdown timer. Why Dimitrijevic armed the explosives to behave in such a way was beyond him, but figured it was the last line of defense. Surely there had to be a kill switch where the artifact was hiding. Those who knew the path could get there on time and disable the explosives. Others who had a ‘cursory glance’ at the building schematics might have less chance of success, let alone survival.

The corridor curved around at curious angles, as a means to do nothing more than to slow down the travelers on their journey. The trio found themselves in a brightly lit square room, the luminance so overwhelmingly powerful even Woodward shielded his bandaged eyes from the barrage of light.

“Well, which door, Woodward,” Scott said through squinted eyes.

“What do you mean?” Woodward asked. “There should be only one door.”

Scott looked to Maxine, and then to the three doors inset into each of the walls. Each had a numeric keypad next to them. Random numbers flashed at regular intervals.

“Come on, Woodward. We haven’t got time for this.”

Woodward felt his way around the room, gently placing his hands over each of the keypads. “I’m telling you, there should only be one door.”

Explosions imminent, in... three... minutes.

“Christ. Three minutes,” Scott puffed.

“This is bullshit,” Maxine murmured.

“You fucking got that right,” Scott added. “This whole thing is bullshit. In three minutes, we’re all dead. Where did you get the plans again?”

“I intercepted them,” Woodward hurriedly replied. “Got a cursory glance before they ate my hard drive.”

“Just what I thought,” Scott said, raising his weapon.

“Hey, Woodward?”

Woodward turned. “Yes, Scott?”

BLAM!

Scott fired and Woodward’s head exploded. The body crumpled, revealing a spray pattern of goo on the wall.

Maxine swung around with her weapon. “What the fuck, Scott?”

Scott looked past the barrel, into Maxine’s eyes. “Don’t you see? This whole situation is a setup. It was a way for Dimitrijevic to trap us here, sentenced to our deaths. Retribution. The countdown to imminent destruction, the ladder rungs disappearing, this room, all designed to slow us down. Christ, we haven’t even faced any resistance.”

“Why?”

“Why? This is Dimitrijevic’s last colossal ‘fuck you.’”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t blow your head off like you just did Woodward’s?”

“Because that’s not Woodward.”

“How the fuck do you know that?”

“Because he kept talking about his ‘*cursory glance*’. Since when do you know Woodward to have a cursory glance at anything?”

Maxine chewed the comment over in her head. “Who the fuck is it then?”

“Or what,” replied Scott. “Listen, all I know is this building is coming down in a matter of minutes, and we have got little time to decide. Because we sure as hell can’t go up.”

Maxine eased back on the trigger.

“Do you trust me, Maxine?”

“As much as I trusted that corpse on the ground,” she shot back.

“Well, that doesn’t bode well,” Scott huffed. He walked up to the middle door under the watchful gaze of Maxine’s machine gun sights. Not that she needed them at such a close range. Even Scott could close his eyes and pull the trigger and slice him in half.

“Stand back,” Scott said, readying himself.

“For what?”

“I’m going to kick that door in.”

“Why that door?”

“A hunch.”

“You kick that door in, and it’s the wrong door, this whole place is coming down.”

Scott looked over his shoulder and shrugged. “It’s coming down anyway.”

“And what do you think you will find behind that door?”

Scott turned at the voice: *Explosions imminent, in... two... minutes.*

“More than we’ll find standing around out here.”

Scott reared up and kicked the door hard, enough power to break a man’s ribs. The door barely moved, and Scott held his hamstring.

“God damn it,” he pushed between clenched teeth as he hopped away from the door.

“Forgot to do your stretches?” Maxine smirked.

She raised her weapon and released a controlled burst of fire at the handle and lock. Metallic clicks sounded, and the door released.

Maxine, weapon at the ready, kicked the door in. Scott appeared beside her, a smile appearing on his face.

“Well, well, well,” Scott said. “I guess someone owes me an apology.”

He looked over the two prisoners. Each was tied to a chair, gags in their mouths, pleading to be released.

“Great to see you, Woodward,” Scott said. “Who’s your friend here?”

Maxine removed Woodward’s gag and release him from his bonds, while Scott released the woman.

Explosions imminent, in... one... minute.

“We’ll finish this conversation later,” Scott shouted. “Woodward, any chance you have an escape plan?”

“No, sir. Do you?”

“There,” the woman shouted as she pointed to a grate in the wall. “The vent.”

“I don’t think that will save us.”

“It will if it’s not a vent.”

“Of course,” Scott said. “Why would it be?”

Around them, the building shook. Vibrations tore into their bones. Death was imminent.

Scott blinked several times as he stood on the steel concourse. His blurry surroundings slowly formed a solid image. The grate flooring, a crisscross of walkways above, a solid metal door behind him.

“Hurry, Scott,” Xavier shouted. “We haven’t got much time. This place is about to blow.”

Scott looked up to the vehicle in front of him. It looked like a bullet, with one side opened upwards, and Maxine and Xavier sitting inside. Maxine sat at the controls, pressing buttons, and checking gauges. Xavier stood still; his bandaged gaze pointed forward.

There was a rumble overhead, followed by blaring klaxons. Scott could hear gushing water somewhere around him like he was standing behind a waterfall.

“Now, Scott,” Xavier advised.

Scott climbed into the strange vehicle next to Xavier and fumbled with the buckles.

“Best you hold on tight,” Xavier said.

Maxine pressed a button on her dashboard and the door hissed shut.

“Welcome to the shuttle,” Maxine shouted, as she hit the launch button.

The shuttle lurched off from its starting position at a remarkable speed, pushing Scott’s head back into his seat, and his heart into his throat.

Chapter 24

After the initial jolt, Scott got used to the shuttle speed. Lights whizzed by at indeterminate speeds, each flash swallowed by an extensive section of darkness.

“So, this is the shuttle,” Scott said, mesmerized by the intermittent flashes outside the viewing pane. “What’s the purpose of it?”

“We’re using it for its purpose,” Maxine shouted from the control panel.

Xavier laughed. “Hours by helicopter or about fifteen minutes by shuttle. A means to quickly and stealthily access the mainland.”

“Wait, where are the others?”

No answer.

“Xavier?”

“Yes... Sorry. I was lost in thought. The others, yes, they went ahead. No point all of us getting captured if it all went awry.”

“To be honest, I wasn’t expecting any rescue mission,” Scott said. “Let alone you leading the charge.”

“Me neither,” Maxine added from the front. She got up and walked to the rear of the vehicle and sat opposite the other two. “I would’ve thought you’d blown the charges as soon as possible.”

Xavier looked down and smirked. “We rigged the detonation of charges to explode when both shuttles departed. We’ll be well and truly at our destination when the tunnel collapses. And don’t think it didn’t cross my mind to leave you two behind. But I couldn’t. Scott, you are more important than you will ever know. You are crucial if we demand success.”

“Me? You keep saying it, but I can’t be. I’m not Maxine. I’m not like her.”

“Everyone has their skill set, Scott. But you? You are something else. Perhaps that’s why it’s so hard to unlock, why it’s buried so deep.”

Scott looked to the window and then back again. “You said you would tell me everything on this trip. Best you talk.”

Xavier reached up to his temples.

“You all right, Xavier?” Maxine asked.

“I’ll be fine. It was just a spark or something. I’m sure my eyesight will return to normal soon. When we get back to the others.”

“What the hell is Zero Division? You promised me answers and I want them.”

“Scott,” Maxine said. “Maybe this can wait until we are with the others.”

“No,” Scott shouted defiantly. “Xavier promised answers.”

“Scott’s right. And so, I shall share everything with you. The Circle crafted Zero Division in a lab, designed as small team insertions at the will of the powerful. They deployed us in all manner of situations; to exterminate a head of state, help another gain power, stabilize a region, destabilize a region for war. Our pursuits were noble, for the good of all, or so we thought.”

“So, you just went about their bidding? Whatever they wanted you to do?”

“Exactly.” Xavier looked down. “I’m not proud of what I’ve done, but you must understand the control we were under. I know this is no excuse, but I’m trying to make up for it now.”

“Where do the sleeper agents come into it?”

Xavier sighed. “Ah, the Sleepers. The likes of you and the others were the insurance policies.”

“What do you mean?”

“They designed Sleepers to work alone. You were individual agents, with separate protocols and missions. You never even knew there was anything like you out there.”

“So, what happened?”

“It happened many years ago. I’m not sure what, because when it happened, everything shut down. Records got destroyed. They disbanded Zero Division, with sleeper agents assigned to kill each of us.”

“Obviously not too successful judging by all those people we just left behind.”

“*People* is a powerful word, Scott. Perhaps *organism* is better suited. Regardless, battles ensued. Don’t get me wrong. Zero Division lost vast numbers at the hands of the Sleepers. Once the Sleepers performed their assigned tasks, they shut down again. Put them into storage for the next uprising. But the remaining members of Zero Division banded together in secrecy to find and destroy all the remaining sleeper agents, to destroy them in case it happened again.”

“But not you? You didn’t band with them?”

“No,” Xavier blurted. “Their aim is simple. Destroy all the Sleepers so there is no one left to stop them.”

“Stop them from what?”

“That is a troublesome question to answer. But think of the worst conceivable outcome and multiply it a hundredfold.”

“And you’re getting in the way, you’re stopping them on their quest,” Scott breathed.

“Very much so. It started with Maxine.”

Scott looked over, and she shrugged nonchalantly.

“When we, Zero Division, received orders to eliminate the Sleepers,” Xavier continued, “something happened. I don’t know what it was or why it happened to me, but I experienced a level of clarity I had never considered possible. Maybe my programming was faulty, perhaps the chemicals in my brain became unbalanced. Whatever the reason, all manner of information flooded my consciousness. I started to remember things. After convincing Maxine to join me on my quest, I located the facility. It held even more secrets, long-forgotten mysteries. It helped me to conduct my research, hunt down

my leads. I started finding Sleepers and using my program, waking them from their veiled existences to help build my army. Unfortunately, the facility is now lost.”

“So, there’s more like us out there? More Sleepers?”

“Of course. How many, I can’t say. Where they are, even less so. What I do know is Zero Division won’t stop until *your* kind is all but dead.”

“So, they’re just going to keep coming? After you? After us?”

“They are relentless, Scott. That’s their programming, as strong and inexorable as yours. Do you know what I was doing in that airport bathroom stall when I met you?”

Scott shrugged.

“I was killing a member of Zero Division. Strangling him, crushing his throat. You were their next target, Scott. They knew about you. But they don’t know what I know. For if they did, you’d already be dead.”

Scott swallowed hard and turned his attention to the flashing lights out the viewing pane.

“I’m sure none of this is easy to hear, Scott. Nor understand for that matter. But you have to trust me. We are doing the right thing.”

“I mean, it’s a far cry from selling pens and paper to various companies. I just wish I was more use, that’s all.”

“It’ll happen, Scott. We just need to dig a little deeper.”

The console beeped.

“Five minutes till stateside,” Maxine said.

“What’s the plan when we get there?”

“We’ll meet up with the others,” Xavier said. “Maxine, I’ll need your eyes until I can recover. Scott, I’ll need you again. I don’t know what we will face when we arrive. They may have traced us; they may have mapped out the tunnel. There could be an armada waiting to execute all of us. Or there could be nothing. But I’d rather not take the chance. I just need you to be ready.”

Maxine ejected the magazine from her weapon and checked the ammo. She threw it to the side.

“Empty?” Scott asked.

“No, just no good walking around the city with a machine gun strapped to my shoulder. Tends to raise the alert of the authorities. And the less heat we have on us the better.”

She reached under her seat and pulled out a compartment lined with handguns and ammunition. She selected a weapon, checked it, and handed it to Scott. He looked over it, gently ran his hands over it.

“It’s a gun,” she said. “Not a newborn baby. Tuck it into your belt, just don’t shoot your dick off.”

“Because you care about my dick?” Scott asked.

“No, I care about not having to administer a penectomy and re-naming you Scout.”

She pulled out another weapon, cocked it, and eased it into Xavier’s hands. Finally, she loaded up her person, as much as one could conceal without drawing attention to oneself.

“Where exactly are we arriving into?” Scott asked.

The flashing lights faded into a single powdery glow.

“You’re about to find out,” Maxine said.

Chapter 25

The storm that erupted as the shuttle entered the station slowly died down, dust lingering in the old, yellow glow of random bulbs that littered the station roof. The engines wound down as the door hissed open, and Maxine stepped off, Xavier right behind, hanging onto her shoulder. Scott eased out and felt like he had stepped into a mausoleum, the cold naked concrete bearing down on him. He noted the other shuttle on the tracks opposite a central platform. Their footsteps echoed off into the darkness, and Scott looked to the tunnel they had emerged from.

“What the hell is this place?” Scott asked as the smell of damp concrete fought its way into him.

“A direct route to the island, a perfect way to inject Agents, Sleepers, Zero Division, into the city. From there, they could scatter where they needed to, flights to anywhere, and so on. Inaccessible to the public or anyone else.” Xavier turned. “Lead us on, Maxine.”

Maxine led the group to the end of the platform towards the tunnel. Wafts of seawater rose upon them, the result of their thoroughfare collapsing into the cold Pacific. She stopped at the elevator door and called for their ride. The door opened immediately, and the trio entered the tight space. Chequer plate lined every surface, save for a small black plate next to the open doors.

They waited. Doors remained opened.

“Uh, Xavier?”

Xavier leaned his head towards Maxine’s voice. “Yes?”

“Your fingerprint?”

“Oh,” he called out. “Of course. This injury has very much got me off-kilter.” He held up his right hand.

Maxine grabbed his left hand, singled out the ring finger, and pressed it against the plate. The doors immediately closed and the metal cocoon rumbled to life, slowly ascending.

“Sorry again,” Xavier announced. “I’ll need a full assessment when we get to the others.”

Maxine looked over him carefully, and then to Scott. “Best you get ready. As I said, I’m not sure what we’re about to step into.”

Scott pulled the earplugs from his pocket, and wedged them into his ears, and waited for them to do their work. It amazed him at how comfortable he was in releasing his body to the unknown, like falling asleep and letting the dream sequence take over.

Scott slid down the metal tube. Woodward, the real Woodward, was a flailing of arms and just below him. A fireball followed his descent, just above him, and close enough to melt his brain. There was a moment of complete weightlessness, of time standing still, until the harsh impact of reality hit him. He looked up as the fireball mushroomed out of the vent, a complex array of yellow and black, as he landed in a cardboard laden metal box, landing heavily on those who had arrived just before he had.

Apologies were unrequired as the more pressing matter of escaping a collapsing building was upon them. They pushed and pulled each other out of the bin as another wave of violent rumblings bore down on them. Maxine ran for a side door, launching a flying kick into the metal barrier, the others in close pursuit.

The group burst out into an alley occupied by sizeable chunks of reinforced concrete and twisted carbon steel.

Quickly gauging bearings, Maxine and Scott took off towards the street, guns ready to fire at anything that got in the way. Woodward pulled along the mysterious woman from the room as dust clouds enveloped them.

A black SUV screeched to a halt in front of the alleyway amongst hordes of screaming pedestrians who did their best to escape the unplanned demolition. Doors clicked open and armed mercenaries trained their weapons on the dust cloud, hoping for a kill.

Hot bullets punched holes in the cloud, leaving wisps of dust in their wake. Each finding a mark in a soldier's forehead. Bodies fell or hung limply from their positions. A mercenary from the opposite side of the vehicle fell backward, the cadaver hanging awkwardly from the rear seat.

The driver gunned the V8 engine, lurching the backseat body onto the roadway and under the rear tires. The back of the SUV jostled over the soldier's face, leaving a smear of blood and brain on the bitumen.

Maxine burst from the alleyway and aimed, firing a shot through the open rear door and into the back of the driver's head. A spray of goo washed over the inside of the windshield, the body collapsing onto the steering wheel, the vehicle idling across the lane to the other side of the street. Surrounding cars screeched tires and honked horns as they evaded the runaway vehicle, their concern more on the building that was collapsing on itself in the middle of the city.

The group raced towards the idling vehicle, well aware that hundreds of thousands of tons of concrete, glass, and steel were pummeling the ground behind them. They stopped short in the middle of the street, curious about a drone hovering in front of the vehicle they were heading to.

"What a very curious thing," Woodward remarked.

Scott aimed his weapon and fired. The bullet sparked off the metallic bug which righted itself and continued its ominous stare.

Then another sound. Faint at first. It was Maxine who spotted it first, a fast-moving object flying at skyscraper level heading right for them.

"Oh, shit!" Maxine called out. "Bogey inbound."

The others followed her gaze.

Scott said, “We should—.”

The ear-piercing sound reached its crescendo before the missile struck the idling SUV. The force from the explosion threw the group backward as a hot wave crashed into them. Nearby storefront glass shattered. The vehicle jumped off the ground, returning to earth as a fireball, the make and model unrecognizable.

The drone slowly flew over to them and tilted down. It seemed to focus its vision, glaring through squinted circuits, at its next target.

Maxine looked over to Scott. “You were saying?”

Chapter 26

Maxine took off down an adjacent alley, sirens echoing from the street behind her. “What the fuck was that?” she yelled over her shoulder.

“Given we’re alive, it certainly wasn’t ballistic,” Woodward replied. He had grabbed their newly acquired person by the hand and yanked her along at pace behind Maxine. She constantly brushed her long black hair out of her face to help with her vision. She misplaced her footing a few times, with Woodward helping her to her feet to keep moving.

“Definitely small, specific, and self-contained,” Scott shouted. “I have seen nothing like it. Just keep moving as far away from here as possible.” He stayed at the rear and hustled them along, firing shots at the stalking drone. It offered no reaction and accepted each direct hit with an unwavering countenance. Kept its distance, did not try to interact with them. Just glared with unseen eyes, observing every movement.

“Get that thing off our tails,” Maxine yelled from the front. “I don’t want to watch over my shoulder for a cruise missile to bear down on my ass.”

A black SUV skidded to a halt across the end of the alleyway. The group took shelter behind an industrial bin. Bullet spray pinged off every available surface. Maxine held her machine gun around the corner of the barricade and released a burst in reply.

“We can’t stay here,” Scott shouted, investigating his surroundings for a way out. Suddenly, the drone became unimportant.

“Well, get that door open then,” Maxine shouted back as she let loose with another volley of fire.

Scott looked at the door he was leaning against, a red emergency exit door for the building. He noted the small plexiglass panel near the top of the door.

“Cover me,” he yelled.

As Maxine lashed out with more retaliation, Scott stood and jammed the butt of his machine gun into the panel. It shattered into large grains, leaving more than enough space to reach inside. He unlatched the door as a barrage of bullets singed the door above his head.

Scott hustled inside and ushered everyone while firing at the drone. Maxine was the last, laying down a final swath of covering fire, enough for her to escape into the safety of the building.

As the group descended the stairs, Scott took one last look towards the door. The drone seemed to inspect the opening it couldn't fit through, before elevating out of sight.

The group scurried down a few levels and burst out into a multi-level parking area. A myriad of vehicles, mostly boring sedans and practical people movers, greeted them. They maneuvered through the parking lot looking for a suitable ride.

Scott turned in front of the group. Sweat soaked concrete dust covered them. Maxine was bleeding from a head wound, possibly when a missile destroyed their original getaway SUV. She seemed to wear it with pride. Woodward held the mysterious woman up, her arm around his shoulders. Long dark hair stuck to her wet face. She seemed out of place, uneasy in the combat zone.

“Dimitrijevic went to a lot of trouble to make sure no one found you,” Scott said looking at the woman. Her head was down, her gaze on her next shuffled footstep. “And if you were, made it very difficult to keep you alive. So, you had better talk.”

“My name is Maria,” she whispered between quivering lips. Her accent was part Eastern Bloc, part Queen’s English. As muddy as her complexion.

“Why did Dimitrijevic kidnap you? What did he want from you?”

She slowly looked up, cocked her head “He didn’t kidnap me,” she said. “I volunteered.”

“What do you mean you volunteered?” Scott asked. “You willingly joined your family’s enemy?”

She smiled. Devious. “My father never understood, never had the balls to do what Dimitrijevic was trying to do.”

“And what’s that exactly?”

“We were making an army. Neural implanted replicas with extraordinary vision, that couldn’t feel pain, that were exceptional fighting machines right out of the box. No training required. Instant killing machines that carried out orders, instead of questioning them.”

“And what was your role in all this?”

“I have degrees and certification in particle regeneration, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and nuclear physics. I didn’t have a role in the program, I *am* the program.”

“If you were so important to Dimitrijevic, why was he willing to kill you.”

“I guess if he couldn’t have me, then no one could,” she replied with a smile. “Besides, the work had neared completion, the Replicas were online.”

“Well shit,” Maxine butted in. “None of this sounds good.”

“Jesus Christ,” Scott breathed. “This wasn’t some kind of rescue mission. This was a snatch and grab. Krantz wants you all for himself!”

Maria shrugged, seemed to lose interest in the conversation.

The sound of a banging door followed by heavy footsteps echoed around the parking garage.

“Might be best to take this conversation on the road,” Maxine suggested.

They turned to inspect the vehicle Scott had stopped them in front of.

“It’s a beauty, isn’t she?” Scott asked whimsically.

“Certainly,” Maxine said. “But it won’t look like that when we’re through with it.”

The shiny black Hummer’s tires screeched on the polished concrete as it circled upwards to the exit. Woodward and Maria clung to the safety rails in the backseat, as Scott screamed in joy at the roar of the six-liter V8. With a straight-line bolt to the exit, the drone slowly descended on the street outside.

Maxine, a look of determination and disgust on her face, jammed the accelerator. The wide-body beast shuddered and rocked back. It busted through the flimsy security gate and mashed into the flying parasite. The Hummer skidded onto the roadway, narrowly missing a series of cars, each screeching and honking. Electronics skittered off in a thousand directions as the drone become just another casualty.

“I guess that was easier than I thought,” Maxine scoffed as she squealed around corners to put as much distance between them and Dimitrijevic’s soldiers.

“Of course,” Scott said, patting the dash. “This baby will take us back to the safe house with no—.” He stopped short in finishing the sentence.

Maxine mashed the brakes, the Hummer’s tires locking up, leaving two lines of black on the bitumen. The vehicle trembled to a

complete stop in the middle of the road, the rear passengers thrown forward in the sudden deceleration.

“Is everything okay up there?” Woodward asked.

Maxine and Scott stared out the front windshield, at the squadron of drones descending in front of them. Maxine revved the engine, the Hummer eager to jump off the blocks.

“Sir?” Woodward called from the back seat.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Scott asked, ignoring the noise from the rear compartment.

“Don’t see why not,” Maxine replied. “Seemed to work pretty well last time.”

“Sir?” Woodward called again.

“You just going to ram them?” Scott asked.

Maxine cocked her head. “Might back over them if I get the chance,” she replied.

“Sir!” Woodward shouted.

Scott turned. “What is it, Woodward?”

And then he saw it.

The four people bailed out of the car as the heat seeker missile bore down on their location. There was no time to maneuver or retaliate. Only to run. Maxine and Maria bolted in one direction, Scott and Woodward in the other. Each desperately sought cover for the impending destruction of the Hummer.

The impact caused a sudden shock wave that broke, dented, or scorched everything. White flame instantly engulfed the Hummer, dismembering the chassis in one fell swoop. A fireball worked up into a mushroom cloud, black plumes engulfing the sky.

Scott found himself on his back, his ears still ringing, the blue sky turning ugly shades of gray. He pushed himself up on his elbows and attempted to call out but couldn’t hear himself. He jolted his

head a few times to knock things into place. Through a heat haze, he saw Maxine limp over to Woodward, Maria's arm around her shoulder.

More than anything, Scott wanted a holiday. To be lying on a beach, a very cold and very alcoholic beverage in his hand—one that had a piece of fruit and a little umbrella. He'd watch the sun sink into a warm ocean. Then he would pass out until the next morning when he would repeat the process. *What a way to kill time.*

Screeching tires destroyed his fantasy. Through half-open eyes, he saw a silver van pull up and the sliding door open.

A man stuck his head out. "What the hell are you doing down there?"

"Fuck you, Krantz," Scott fired back.

The four wounded piled into the back of the van at the behest of Krantz, as a dozen drones encircled the vehicle. They hovered. Stared. Focused. Krantz sat backward, behind the driver, with his guests occupying the tight back seat.

"You'd better do something about those drones," Scott mumbled. "Because I don't feel like being involved in another explosion today."

Krantz reached into his jacket and pulled out a small device. He pressed the button. One by one the drones sparked and fell from the sky, no more dangerous than a television remote.

"Damn," Maxine said. "Really could have used that earlier."

"Makes you wonder why you didn't have it," Krantz sang suspiciously.

Scott eyed the Deputy Director of the National Clandestine Service, who smirked and adjusted his tie. His bald head and weathered features had seen their fair share of action over the years. Krantz was different from Special Agent Rollinson. Krantz had seen real action in real places, perpetrated by real bad people. The scar that ran along his cheek was tantamount to that.

“Ah, Woodward,” Krantz drawled. “Would you be so kind as to retrieve the bag from the compartment behind you?”

Woodward did so, turning in his place to reach over his seat.

The move was as sudden as it was unexpected. Krantz pulled out a nickel-plated firearm and fired a round into the back of Woodward’s head. Blood and brain coated Maria’s and Maxine’s face. No warning. No explanation.

Scott blinked. “What the fuck?”

Krantz handed over the weapon. “A necessary development in the narration,” he said. He reached under his collar and pulled. Skin came away. It was thin at first, then become thick and rubbery the more Krantz pulled at it.

“I don’t believe what the fuck I’m seeing,” Scott said.

“What the hell is going on here?” Maxine added.

Woodward leaned forward. “I apologize for the ruse, sir, however, it was of the utmost importance.”

“You’d better start talking, Woodward. And fast.”

“The agency is in trouble, sir. Infiltrated to the highest degrees. You need to be sure you’re talking to who you’re talking to. I would spread your trust thinly, even on those you know the most.”

“Are you the *real* Woodward?” Scott asked.

Woodward sat back. “Why, of course, I am, sir.”

Scott pointed the gun. “That’s exactly what a replica would say!”

“Very well, sir,” Woodward said with a smile. “Ask me a question, something only I would know. If you are unsatisfied with my answer, you may eliminate me.”

Scott cocked the weapon. “Alright then. That time in Vegas with the hooker, the donkey, the bottle of Jack, and the bag of counterfeit chips.”

“Seventy-two,” Woodward said calmly.

Scott decocked the weapon and handed it back to Woodward.

Maxine looked over to Scott. "Are you going to tell me the connection there?"

Scott shrugged. "What happens in Vegas," he said.

"Quite, right," Woodward added. "You need to be careful who you trust, sir."

"Wait," Maxine said. "What was this all about? Why did Krantz need Maria?"

"He doesn't need Maria," Woodward said. "We do."

"Why?"

"Because Krantz has gone missing."

Chapter 27

Scott swayed back and forth as blackness turned into a dim reality. He reached out and grabbed a wall for support, eventually dropping to one knee. Pain tore up one side of his body, and he was sure he was bleeding from somewhere. Damp air invaded his senses, wet concrete that had gone unattended, like a basement in the middle of winter.

Looking up, he saw Maxine nursing her wounds. She leant against a wall near a set of ascending concrete stairs, taking deep breaths. Dust covered one half of her body, bloody grazes covering the other half. A streak of blood ran down her elbow, most likely the least of her worries.

Xavier squatted in the corner, his makeshift bandage in tatters, his black flight suit torn at the elbows and knees. His head was in his hands, gripping the side of his head. A bloodstain on the side of his face, a cut that refused to seal.

A heavy steel grate lay in the middle of the floor, next to a dank pit.

“What the hell happened?” Scott breathed.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Maxine sighed. “But I can tell you the city is a fucking mess. We need to get to the others and sort out what we’re doing. We can’t stay here, not for long.”

“Correct,” Xavier said from the corner. “They will find us soon, and when they do, we need to be prepared. What we just experienced is nothing to what they are capable of. They will regroup, strategize, and execute.”

Scott considered their words. They were in pain, looking like they barely got through with their lives. He thanked God he could live through the experience in his fantasy world. Even though that was no walk in the park, he had the ability and confidence not to die.

He couldn't be sure how he would operate in the real world, with actual people, with dangerous weapons.

"Come on," Maxine said to Scott. "Not much farther." She turned to Xavier. "Then we can get you fixed up."

Xavier pushed himself up the wall and shuffled over, reaching out for Maxine. His eyes were half-closed as if protecting them from the dimness. "Lead the way, Maxine. My vision is slowly returning, but it's still not quite there. It's all gray shapes at the moment, I'm afraid."

Scott followed the others up the stairs, and across a landing to a heavy steel door inset into yet another concrete wall. She approached the keypad offset to the left of the barrier and pushed her body against it as she keyed in the code, either through a lack of trust or out of habit. Scott couldn't determine which. Didn't have the energy to think about it nor the mental capabilities to read her.

Numerous solid rods clicked into place, one after the other, the sound of metal on metal invading the compact space. Maxine pulled on the door and it swung back with some effort. On the other side, she pulled it shut, the same machine noise sounded to secure the door once more.

"Christ, are we in a safe?" Scott asked.

"Well, we're in a safe house, if that helps?" Maxine replied.

Maxine led Xavier and Scott through a series of passageways, a left, three rights, short hallways, small stairwells.

"I'm lost," Scott said.

"You should be," Maxine replied. "It's designed that way."

"Another level of protection," Xavier mentioned. "If they locate the entrance, then get through the door, they need to navigate their way through the maze."

They ended up at a solid black door. Scott noted muffled voices beyond.

“Best we don’t make them shit their pants entirely,” Maxine said, then banged on the door three times with her fist.

The noise beyond the door extinguished instantly. Maxine looked over the other two, before placing her finger on the frame. The door fell open a crack, the magnetic lock disengaging.

Maxine pushed it forward and stepped into the doorway.

A gun appeared at her head.

Maxine stopped.

“Fuck sake, Maxine, I thought you were dead!” Charlotte holstered her weapon.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I feel like it,” Maxine said. “Plus, I brought friends.”

“Friends? Plural?”

Scott followed Xavier inside, the door sucking shut behind them.

What came next was absolute chaos.

Charlotte immediately drew her weapon, pointing it at Scott and Xavier, shouting for them to stay where they were. Maxine instinctively pulled her gun, traced the threat to her companions.

“What the hell are you doing?” she yelled.

Charlotte ignored the questions, kept shouting at the newest entrants. Jacob came from another room, gun raised. He stopped dead in the middle of the room, waving his gun back and forth, shouting his directions. Sound bounced; disharmony bellowed in the space.

Then another man appeared into the room, striding forward from the shadows of a hallway.

Maxine took a step back, shifted her aim to the recent arrival.

“What the fuck?!” she roared.

She took in his features. His eyes, his hair. The way he carried himself, the way he stood there. Swung the gun back around, then back again, slicing through the torrent of threats coming from her allies.

“Wait! Wait! Everybody shut the fuck up!” Maxine thundered. She pointed the gun at the man. “Who the fuck *are* you?”

He stood in a slate gray suit with his arms out. “Maxine, I’m Xavier. I should ask why you’ve led a member of Zero Division into the safe house.”

“Incredulous,” her Xavier shouted as he threw his arms up, eyelids blinking rapidly. “He’s lying, Maxine. I’m the real Xavier. He’s an imposter who has fooled the others. If I were you, I could shoot him immediately.”

“We have protocols,” the new Xavier said. “We need to move fast; the rest will be upon us. He’s probably carrying a tracking device. Kill him now before he can activate it!”

“Nonsense,” the old Xavier said. “Check my pockets, frisk me if you like. He’s fooled you.” He looked at Charlotte. “How much did you show him? How much did he see? We can’t have that knowledge getting out. He will compromise the entire operation. You should get rid of him before he can transmit any data if he hasn’t done so already.”

Jacob and Maxine shifted their sights between the two Xaviers, confusion and mistrust lying thick in the room. Charlotte drew a second weapon. Scott backed away into a corner of the room, away from the focus of the gun barrels. The two Xaviers eye-balled each other, neither giving their position away.

“How the fuck are we going to sort this one out?” Maxine boomed.

An easy rumble sauntered underfoot.

“I don’t know,” Charlotte replied. “But we better make it quick.”
And then the alarms went off.

FEROCITY

“I traded cowardice for cruelty. I traded weakness for ferocity.”

Veronica Roth

“You take action based on where you want to be, not based on where you are.”

Terry Crews

Chapter 28

One week earlier

Xavier sauntered through the multi-story parking lot, humming to himself. Up ahead, Maxine sat on the hood of a deep blue BMW, swinging her legs while looking out at the terminal. She turned at the sound of the humming.

“How’d it go?” she asked.

Xavier shrugged. “Good enough,” he said. “With any luck, Mr. Harris will already be soaking in the *Identity* application.”

“Do you think he’ll come through like the rest of us?”

“I don’t see why not. Besides, if there’s any trouble, he’ll be safely tucked away across the other side of the country. That will give us some time to get ourselves in order.”

Maxine turned to the front. A large jet had just taken off, and the sound boomed through the lot.

“Are you going to tell me what’s so special about him?”

Xavier leaned against the vehicle; arms folded. “In good time. You’ll just have to trust me until then.”

Maxine nodded. She had trusted him from the beginning, mainly because there was little option not to. The months seemed like years, each day a fresh battle just to stay alive. The things he had shared with her, had shown her, had opened her eyes to a new reality. From the moment Xavier awakened her, she knew fierce action was the only action required.

“I guess I really don’t have a choice. I just hope you’re right about him. We took some risks out there. I’m not a big fan of being that exposed.”

“You seemed just fine. Besides, it all worked out.”

“Yeah, except that’s not your M.O. The others weren’t as public as this.”

“No,” he replied. “No, they weren’t.”

She turned to look at him. “Which means you had a secondary motive for making the connection in such a public place.” She tapped her chin. “You wanted to see if the Zeds thought Scott was as valuable as you think he is.”

Xavier looked down. “Can’t get anything by you. How’d it go with the other Zeds?” he asked.

Maxine slid off the bonnet and landed deftly on the concrete. Her boots made no sound on the gritty surface as she rounded Xavier to get to the rear of the vehicle. She reached into her pocket and took a quick look around to ensure they were alone. Satisfied, she pressed the release, and the trunk popped open.

Xavier nestled up next to her to see the spoils. Three Zeds lay mangled together in the rear compartment. Identical features to each other, except for the hair. One with long blonde locks tied at the back with a hairband. Two with closely cropped red hair. Limbs intertwined to a point where it was difficult to see where one ended and the other began. Blood leaked from the thin lines across their necks.

“Trust they weren’t any trouble,” he said.

“They all died in my arms,” she lulled.

“I expect nothing less. Did you check their necks?”

“Yep, clean. Nothing there.”

“Good. I’d hate for the car to incinerate before we cleared out.”

Maxine looked behind him. “I don’t see your Zed anywhere. Where’d you leave it?”

“I left mine in the restroom stall.”

“You don’t think that’s a little too public?”

"I can't very well go carrying a body over my shoulder through a crowded airport now, can I?"

"I guess not."

Suddenly, one body let out a gasp.

"All dead?" Xavier quipped.

"Except that one," she said. "Saved him just in case you wanted a brief chat with it."

"Did you get anything out of it?"

"Nothing we didn't already know. I'd say this lot weren't part of the adult's table at the Zero Division strategy conversations."

"Fair enough. If you couldn't get anything out of it, I seriously doubt I could, regardless of who I am. Besides, it would just slow us down. Best you get rid of it."

"I was hoping you would say that."

While maintaining eye contact with Xavier, she extracted a tactical knife and jammed it down into the eye of the moaning Zed. A spurt of blood erupted from the impact point and coated the trunk lid. The sickening crunch produced silence as the tip of the carbon steel blade punctured the brain.

"I guess it's time for a new car," Xavier announced. "Did you have anything in mind?"

Maxine pulled out the blade and wiped it on her sleeve before re-turning it securely to the sheath attached to her belt.

"I like the look of that Jeep over there."

Xavier scanned the lot. "The gray one? Sure, why not? Let's make sure we get rid of all this first."

Chapter 29

One week later

Alarms warped through the complex. Scott cowered in the corner as Maxine and Jacob swung their barrels from one Xavier to the other. Charlotte had weapons trained on both of them. Vibrations rumbled across the walls.

“They’re getting closer,” Jacob said. “It won’t be long.”

“Decide,” said the Xavier wearing the black flight suit, the one Maxine brought with her. “Take us both or kill us both. They’re the only two options.”

“For the good of the war,” said the Xavier wearing a white shirt with navy slacks. “Do what you need to do!”

Maxine could feel the Zeds coming for them, just about smell them through the battlements. She switched gazes between the two Xaviers, looked deep into their dark eyes, hoping something would give her a hint which was the real Xavier, her Xavier. Both remained steadfast in their positions, one standing by the truth, the other living a lie.

A solid thud on the steel door, powerful enough for Scott to feel the tremor along the wall he had pushed himself up against. He yanked out the device. Low battery warning. Hovered his finger over the icon as he contemplated his next move. Would it be enough to save them? Did he really need to do it? Placed the device back in his pocket and crept behind Jacob. His large frame seemed to block out the chaos, projected a sliver of serenity.

Another heavy thud sent a shiver up Scott’s spine, enough to shake him into reality.

“We can hold them off here,” Charlotte claimed.

“No,” Maxine said. “We need to get out of here. In a minute, heavily armed and armored Zeds will swarm us. Then it will only be a matter of time before they wipe us all out.”

“What about them?” Charlotte said, referring to the two Xaviers.

“Take them both. We’ll have to sort all this out later.” She looked over the group. “Go! Out through the emergency exit.”

“Where are we going to go?” Jacob asked as people cleared the room.

“A place only I know about,” Maxine shouted.

The group weaved down a long corridor and through multiple rooms. Scott jostled along in the middle of the convoy, trying to keep pace, his heart beating out of his chest. Maxine brought up the rear, guns trained on the space behind them in case they were too late. They’d put up the fight, regardless of how hopeless it would be.

Jacob entered the code into the keypad when they reached the steel door. Just like the other, the correct code released the high-pressure magnet, allowing the heavy door to swing in. He stepped to the side to let them all pass, Charlotte taking the lead of the hurried procession into a dimly lit, red-bricked tunnel. Maxine closed the door and took off after the others, only to turn around a few paces into the gloom.

“You coming?” she said to Jacob.

He held a detonator in his left hand, a submachine gun in the other. “Go on, I’ll hold them off here.”

“You don’t need to. They’ll—”

Another heavy thud, this one on the door they just passed through.

“Go,” he yelled. “We’ve all got our roles, Maxine. This one is mine. Now, get out of here.”

Another hefty clunk on the door.

Jacob turned. "Go!" he roared over his shoulder. "I'll hold them for as long as I can."

Xavier had warned her about moments like that, where they would have to make a choice that could kill one of them for the good of the mission.

"Must protect Mr. Harris," he would say. "At all costs. He is going to end the war for us. Kill me, all of us, if it keeps him alive. Whatever the cost."

Whatever the cost. She never understood and still didn't. If she had her way, she'd replace Scott with Jacob in a heartbeat. Despite his extraordinary skills when using the application, he was entirely useless without it. She could have put it down to the fact that Xavier was wrong about Scott, that the information he received was bad. But she couldn't doubt him, not after what he'd done for her.

"I'll see you soon, Jacob."

He nodded but didn't turn around.

Maxine spun and sprinted off after the others. Through the murk, she saw bodies dart down corridors. The emergency exit was just as potent as the way in, and remembering the sequence of turns, especially under stress, was as difficult as remembering pie to a hundred decimal places.

Further along the tunnel, Scott was panicking. He could sense the enemy coming up behind him. Almost feel their breath on the back of his neck. Unintelligible words invaded his brain. Garble. He didn't want it there, and yet, there it was. Heart hammered in his chest.

Couldn't bare it any longer. It was time.

Pulled out the device and hit the button. The tunnel got darker; bricks floated out of place. His heavy footsteps changed tone and pace.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was almost blinded by the brightness of the day. Clear blue sky above. Large trees flanked the rain-soaked, narrow path underfoot. Ahead of him, a man darted around the corner. Andrik had been on the run for days. Ever since he busted into the brothel, Scott thought he had cornered his prey.

However, Andrik proved himself to be elusive. And he had every right to be. Andrik knew what was in store when they captured him. Intelligence suggested he knew everything, including where Krantz was being held. He was the last lead, the last bastion of knowledge. Without it, they would have no hope of finding the deputy director. And Scott would do anything to crack Andrik's head open to scoop out the secrets.

Scott darted into the trees. His quads burnt as he charged over a rise, navigating around elms and oaks. A vibrant burst of orange, yellow, and red filled his vision. Leaves crunched under foot. Dispersed foliage kicked to the side. When he got to the edge of the forest, he looked out.

Nothing. No movement. No Andrik. Nothing. The lead had somehow slipped through his fingers. Again. Then, a flutter of birds, a scurry of wildlife, had his attention. Down on the path, a utility hole cover, slightly askew.

Scott ran down to the path and shifted the grate to the side. No time to call for back up. Every second was a second Andrik was getting away. Breathing heavily, Scott pushed his firearm into his concealed holster and climbed down the ladder into the inky abyss.

He splashed down into some runoff, potentially from the night before, and listened. The light from the opening above made it look like he was standing in the spotlight. Strained his ears for any sound

of footsteps or breathing. Nothing. Andrik was a ghost. A magician. Able to disappear in an empty room.

Then he stopped. Not from any sound. Not from any movement. But from some strange sixth sense that he possessed. He spun around, launching a fist into the gloom. A dark shadow on darker walls shrunk into the distance, silent footsteps carrying it away with remarkable speed.

Scott gave chase, splashing through run off, getting deeper with every footstep. Darted around corners and dashed into inky blackness. Water splashed onto the concrete walls. The further he ran, the deeper he fell into the labyrinth of storm drains.

Halted at a crossroads, in a pocket of light streaming down from an overhead grate. Three tunnels stretched away into the distance, none of which showed any signs of Andrik's selection. Another escape.

Then he smelt it, wafting from the first tunnel. Perfume. Sweat. Sex. Flashes of the whorehouse where he intercepted Andrik. It clung to him, left a trail like breadcrumbs. He crept along the curved floor of the pipe, away from the water to conceal his movements.

As the scent strengthened with each passing moment, as to did the darkness lighten. Blacks into dark gray into ash. Around a corner and noted a shaft of light ahead, flowing from an adjacent path. Wind howled through, carrying the scent to him.

Next corner. Dark figure standing in a circle of light.

"No where to go, Andrik," Scott yelled out.

"Oh, I beg to differ," Andrik replied. "By the time you make it to the end of this tunnel, I'll be gone... forever."

"I just need to know where Krantz is. Tell me that and I'll turn around and walk away."

Andrik laughed. "There is no more Krantz. He is but an image... a template."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

“Goodbye, Scott. It’s been an enjoyable experience, but now I must leave.”

Andrik turned. Stepped forward into the light.

Sudden dash of movement. A body flew through the air and tackled Andrik. The shadowy figures melded into a dark blob as Scott ran towards the light.

Scott’s eyes adjusted to the day’s luminance once more.

“Appreciate the assist,” Scott said.

Maxine, her knee on the prisoner’s back, tightened the zip tie around his wrists. He wriggled under her weight. She pushed his face into a puddle of water. Held it there.

“Are you going to calm down?” she asked.

Andrik stopped, and Maxine released him.

“Fuck you,” Andrik spat.

Maxine grabbed his head and thrust it down again.

Then she looked up to Scott. “Team effort,” she said.

Scott looked down at the struggling Andrik. “We still need him.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said, disappointment running through her tone. “Besides, we really need to get out of here.”

“Of course. We really need to interrogate him.”

“No, we need to go. Now!”

Scott shook his head, looked at her quizzically. Watched her expression transform from calmness to fear.

“Now, Scott! Go!”

“Why?”

“Because the whole damn tunnel is collapsing!” Maxine yelled. “Hurry and get up there!”

Scott blinked. Back in the dark tunnel, Maxine’s contorted face screaming at him.

“Jacob has set off the explosives. We need to go! Now!”

At first, there was nothing. Then the gentle rumble morphed into a thunderous roar. The walls shook as Scott gripped the rungs and started climbing, with Maxine right behind. Below them, clouds of dirt and dust formed as the labyrinth folded in on itself.

Maxine popped her head up through the access hole and watched Charlotte commandeer a beige station wagon. The owner, initially frozen by having a semi-automatic rifle pointed at his eyes, quickly surrendered his vehicle, falling over himself trying to find cover.

On one knee, Maxine swept her gaze in both directions of the street. Tires screeched as cars swerved and honked at her. She was waiting for the car that increased in speed, not tried to avoid her. With eyes focused through her sights, she'd take out the driver as quickly as possible, leaving the passengers to deal with an unresponsive vehicle. Easy pickings.

A car squealed to a halt beside her.

"You getting in?" Charlotte asked innocently.

Maxine stood. Without saying a word, she lowered her weapon and sunk into the passenger seat.

Chapter 30

Apart from grunting directions, Maxine was quiet. There had been no drone strikes or car chases or anything else that would allow her to wield her fury. The car ride was almost pleasant. Scott took solace in the twenty minutes of normality, given how meeting Xavier had turned his life upside down. Crammed in the back seat between the two Xaviers (who spent the entire journey staring at each other), he stared ahead, glancing occasionally at the white knuckles on the steering wheel.

Halfway through the journey, Scott looked around, did some mental arithmetic, and asked a question.

“Wait, where’s Jacob?”

No one replied.

Scott leaned forward. “Is he going to meet us at... where ever it is we’re going?”

Maxine swung around. Scott stared down the black barrel of the handgun. “Say one more word. I dare you.”

Scott eased back into his seat, mumbling something unintelligible to himself. Whatever had happened to Jacob, it wasn’t good. And he was fairly sure Maxine didn’t want to talk about her feelings of loss or have a shoulder to cry on. He’d need to provide a whole different level of support for her.

The idling engine died as Maxine pulled the warehouse door closed, encasing them in a dusty blackness. There were no lights, nor anything else in the open space. Scott looked out past Xavier.

“This looks homely,” he muttered.

A loud clack echoed through the space as the overhead bulbs fired, easing into a bright glow. Car doors opened.

“Out!” Maxine ordered the back seat occupants.

White and Black Xavier departed their respective doors under the vigilant stare of their escorts. Scott shuffled over to exit the vehicle. Maxine kicked the door shut, the door sealing with a resounding thud.

“Not you. You can stay there for the moment.”

Scott shuffled back into the middle seat and placed his hands in his lap.

“I guess I’ll just wait here then,” he said, but the others were already out of earshot.

It wasn’t the first time the feeling of utter uselessness carved through him. Many times in the past week, he questioned Xavier’s judgment and decisions, and that moment was no different. He wasn’t some gun-toting maniac... or was he?

He eased the device out of his pocket and stared at his reflection in the black screen. Given how comfortable they were, he had forgotten the buds were still in his ears. It was like they had become a part of him, somehow intertwined with his body. He turned the device over in his hands until he came to the charging port at the base of the unit.

“I’m sure Maxine’s got a charger around here somewhere.”

Scott held his breath as he eased the car door open. The others were completely out of sight. He tiptoed across the concrete floor, clenching his teeth as if it would somehow eliminate noise. In the distance, muffled by cement and steel, he could hear murmurings of conversation; Maxine and Charlotte talking with their respective prisoners. Ahead of him, amongst the steel and cement block of the foundations, was a partitioned office made from frosted glass. There was no door, so he helped himself inside.

Maxine had sparsely furnished the room, with a steel chair behind a steel desk in the middle of the room. On top of the table was a closed laptop. Scott sat in the chair, placed the device on the surface, and started looking through the drawers. The second one down he found a charging cable, however, when returned his attention to the device, he noticed it wasn't only charging, it had booted up.

He hovered a finger over the *Identity* application button. Now there was so much uncertainty, Jacob was dead, and they had an unknown enemy in their midst in the form of the one person they all trusted. It was time to do something. Besides, what could be the worst that could happen?

Scott opened the door to the interrogation room and marched inside. Maxine leaned against the wall in the corner, smoking a cigarette. In the middle of the room, tied to a chair, was Andrik. He had shaved the sides of his head, leaving a mop of long dark locks to curl over his face, like a dark wave crashing on an icy shore. He looked up with pale green eyes.

"I'm never gonna talk."

Scott smirked and removed his jacket, laying it over the lap of their prisoner.

"Be a good boy and hold on to that one for me. I'd hate to get it dry cleaned. It took three weeks to get the bloodstains out last time."

The prisoner's eyes narrowed as Scott rolled up his sleeves.

"Now, Andrik. You know everything I want to know. And I can make this easy or hard. It's your choice."

Andrik hocked a gob of spit in his mouth and spat it down onto Scott's coat. He looked up with a cruel, spittle covered smile. "I'm not telling you shit."

Scott smirked. "Oh, I think you are because if you don't, bad things are going to happen to you."

“Do your worst, comrade.”

“Oh, I intend to.”

“I’m not scared of you. Back home, we’d eat pussies like you for breakfast. Why don’t you untie my hands and we can settle this like men, huh?”

“Then I wouldn’t be able to do this!”

Scott spun and launched a spinning heel kick into Andrik’s jaw. The impact snapped the prisoner’s head around. A spurt of blood flew out of his mouth as his body hit the floor hard. Scott righted him again and inspected the result of the collision. Blood streamed out of Andrik’s nose and mouth. Andrik turned and spat; a tooth in a bloody glob, before smiling awkwardly with blood-stained teeth.

“Yes, I think that’s broken. Now, Andrik. I’ll start with a very simple question. Where is Krantz?”

Andrik leaned forward. “I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about,” he mumbled.

“Come on. You seemed so full of confidence when you thought you were going to get away. I know Miroslav let you in on his plans before I killed him. What did he want with the Deputy Director of the National Clandestine Service?”

Andrik shrugged his shoulders. Another expulsion of blood-filled spit.

“This is your last chance, Andrik. I will not play nice after this.”

Scott counted in his head. Then, in a swift movement, he had wrapped his jacket around Andrik’s neck. He leaned back to use leverage. Andrik choked under the pressure.

“Where is Krantz? Why did Miroslav want him?”

Andrik struggled for breath and he searched for Maxine in the room’s corner.

“Sorry, Andrik,” she said. “I told you I was the good cop. Now you’re stuck with the bad cop.”

“I... know nothing,” he coughed out.

Scott placed a knee against the chair to increase pressure.

"I don't know, Maxine. That just didn't sound genuine. What do you think?"

Maxine took a long draw on her cigarette. "I think he's a lying piece of shit."

"Yeah, I think you're right."

Scott crossed the jacket arms over and positioned himself in front of Andrik. He leaned down at the red face, the bulging, blood-shot eyes, the sweat running down his face.

"You can kill me," he whispered. "It won't change a thing."

"I will not kill you," Scott said. He released the jacket as Andrik fought to suck oxygen into his lungs. He wheezed through his broken jaw, his chipped teeth.

"I told you, you were a pussy," Andrik said.

Scott smiled and claimed his jacket. He brushed off spit and blood to no avail. The royal blue suit jacket was a write off.

"Just you wait right there, Andrik. I have a special guest for you."

Scott left the room, shutting it behind him. When he returned, he opened the door a crack and poked his head through. "Now, Andrik. It's very important you remain calm."

"Fuck you!" came the reply.

Scott opened the door wider and guided the hooded guest inside. They held their hands in front of themselves to avoid knocking into any walls, their feet shuffling over the polished concrete.

"It's okay," Scott whispered as he led the mystery person to stand in front of Andrik. "I got you."

Scott placed his arm around the shoulder of their new guest. He moved closer to the bag, so his mouth would be right near the person's ear.

"Now, this is very important. When I remove the hood, you stay extremely still. Nod if you understand."

The person nodded.

“And it’s important, no matter what happens, to stay very calm. Nod if you understand.”

The person repeated the action.

“Very well then,” Scott said.

He lifted the hood.

Andrik’s eyes opened wide. Breath caught in his throat.

“Son,” he gasped.

“Dad?” the boy whimpered. “What happened to you?”

“Now,” Scott said, “I’m just going to put this hood back down.”

And he lowered the hood over the son’s head.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” Andrik sneered at Scott. “He’s just a boy.”

“And you just know the information I need.”

Scott stepped to the side, pulled out his gun, and placed it against the boy’s head.

“No!” Andrik roared, half in fury, half in anguish.

“Dad?” the boy cried. “What’s happening?”

“Nothing son,” Andrik announced. Then turned back to Scott. “Don’t you fucking do this. Don’t you fucking dare. I’ll fucking kill you.” He fought against the restraints, his muscles contracting in rage. The chair bounced, skidded on the surface. “I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Dad?”

“Now, it’s a very simple question, Andrik. Tell me what I want to know.”

Andrik screamed as he fought against his binds.

“Tell me, Andrik.”

Scott squeezed the trigger.

“I’ll tell you,” Andrik cried.

The door to the room flew open. Scott turned in time to see Woodward flying towards him. The pair crashed into a heap beside Andrik.

“What the hell are you doing, sir?”

“I’m getting results, Woodward. Desperate times call from desperate measures.”

“Not like this, sir. Not like this. Not... like...”

Woodward’s voice sounded so far away.

Bright lights hit him like a truck. A face appeared, originally shrouded in shadow, it cleared to reveal Charlotte. She shouted muted words incessantly at him.

“What?” Scott said.

“I said, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Scott looked around from his vantage point of the warehouse floor. Charlotte straddled him, pinning his arms. Both Xavier’s were there, exhausted looks on their faces, yet observing intently. Maxine watched on from a distance, a gun in her hand, a thin trail of blood ran down the side of her head.

Scott watched Charlotte stand up over him, a dark bruise emerging around her eye. “You damn lucky not to be dead,” she exhaled. “Get up.”

Scott hurried to his feet, still unsure of what happened in reality. In the past, the application had been his savior, not just for him, but for all of them. This time was different.

Maxine strode up to him.

“You and I are going to have a little talk.”

Chapter 31

“I’m not saying I’ve never been scared before, or even after Xavier activated me, but until today, no one by the likes of you has frightened me. That’s changed now. What you did was truly frightening. Congratulations.”

Maxine paced the office. Occasionally she would reach up and gently touch the mark on the side of her head. How it happened was still a mystery to Scott. No one wanted to talk about the incident in any great detail, leaving Scott entirely in the dark as to his actions.

“I’m... I’m sorry. I didn’t... I’m not sure how...”

“Just leave it,” Maxine spat back.

Charlotte leaned against a wall chewing gum. Charlotte had returned their captives to their respective rooms, leaving Scott to cop the brunt of Maxine’s spray. He sat in the uncomfortable metal chair, listening to every deserved word.

“I just wanted to do something,” Scott mumbled. “To add some value to proceedings.”

“You’ve been a liability since the beginning,” Maxine added. “Causing more problems than your fixing.”

“Almost shot Xavier in the head,” Charlotte fired from the spectator seats.

“But maybe that’s what it is,” Maxine continued. “Perhaps that’s why he thinks you’re so important to the mission, to the entire war. So unpredictable the Zeds won’t be able to keep up.”

“Helluva strategy... if it’s true,” Charlotte added. “Could just be a waste of time.”

Maxine shrugged. “I don’t know.” She stopped and folded her arms. “We’ve got a bigger problem at the moment. We’ve got two

Xaviers and we need to figure out which one gets a bullet in their brain.”

“Simple,” said Charlotte. “We’ll ask them some personal questions, things only the real Xavier would know. Then we’ll swap and compare notes. We’ll figure out who the real Xavier is, kill the other one, and enjoy a shot of tequila before the hour is out. Problem solved.”

Maxine nodded. “The simplest plans are the best.”

“What can I do?” Scott asked, hoping to make amends for his previous dangerous actions.

“You can just sit right there,” Maxine ordered. She picked Scott’s device off the desk. “And I’m hanging onto this. I have suspended your *Identity* rights until further notice. The last thing I need is to be looking over my shoulder for you.”

Charlotte took a seat opposite White Xavier after explaining the rules of engagement.

“Tell me where we first met,” Charlotte asked.

“This is ridiculous,” he replied.

“Because you don’t know the answer?”

“No, because it will not work.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the thing in the other room is my symbiote,” Black Xavier said.

“Symbiote. You’ve never mentioned that before,” said Maxine.

“I didn’t think I would ever need to. Never thought we’d be in this position.”

“Well, now we are, you’d better talk.”

“Each Zed has a partner organism—a symbiote. A replica if you will, in every way, shape, and form. They share all things mentally with each other. If one knows it, the other knows it. So, if one of us knows it, the other will. That’s why questions like the ones you’re asking me are entirely useless.”

Charlotte stood up and sauntered around behind her chair. Her head was down deep in thought. The new piece of information had put a sudden cessation of their relatively uncomplicated strategy.

“Why? Why have symbiotes?”

“Because sharing information during a mission is critical. You know what Zeds do and how they orientate around each other, particularly when executing a mission. Imagine executing plans without having to communicate, or even communicate half as much.”

Maxine leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs.

“So, you and your symbiote are sharing information right now? Zeds have been across everything we’ve been doing because of some strange psychic connection?”

Black Xavier smiled.

“The connection only works in proximity to each other. A few blocks from each other, nothing more. Things get a little hazy after that. To be honest, I thought I could turn it off, kind of like a switch. At least disrupt it enough that it would stop working. I guess I was wrong.”

“It’s working right now?”

White Xavier smiled. “Maxine and the imposter are having the same conversation at this very moment.”

“Charlotte and the imposter are having the same conversation at this very moment,” Black Xavier said.

Maxine sighed. “So, what do you propose?”

“Behaviors,” he replied. “Look to the behaviors.”

“How’s that going to help?”

“We share data and information with each other. It’s a constant two-way communication channel, always open, always operating. Behaviors are learned, ingrained, deeper than what we share.”

“So, what did you have in mind?” Charlotte asked.

White Xavier looked down and puffed. “Could be anything. The way we eat, the way we tie our shoelaces, the way we open a can of soda. Anything. Sorry, I don’t want to think about it too much in case I automatically transmit it next door.”

Charlotte looked to the wall, then back to White Xavier. “To be completely honest with you, I haven’t been paying that close attention to your personal habits.”

“In that case,” he started. “You’ve only got one option.”

“And what’s that?”

“Kill us both,” Black Xavier said.

Maxine looked down at her lap.

“We’ve already shared our thoughts,” Black Xavier said. “It’s already too late. I’ll tell you everything I know, everything about everything. But you must promise to put a bullet in both of our brains. Immediately. And without hesitation.”

She looked up. “There’s got to be another way to figure this out.”

He shook his head. “There’s no way you can trap it or stop it. And if that information every gets back to the others, all will be lost. You must kill us both.”

Maxine stared at Xavier, hoping an alternative measure would present itself. None came to mind.

Maxine and Charlotte reconvened in the office. They refused to meet each other’s eyes as if they did, would somehow make their situation real. And it wasn’t anything either of them wanted to face. They shared snippets of information, interrogation stories, and matched conversational elements.

During the Xavier interviews, Scott spent the entire time staring at the wall. No one had said a word, especially Scott, who was well and truly on the outer of the party. Had been since the beginning, and would need to prove himself at the right time... if he didn’t die first.

“What do you think?” Maxine asked Charlotte. She kept her voice low, like a parent discussing whether to give their child ice cream after dinner.

“I think we’re fucked,” Charlotte responded in an equally diffused tone.

“So, the best way forward is to download as much as we can and kill them both. Can we do that? Is there no other option?”

“We’re trained for this.”

“No, not this. Not like this.”

“Xavier—the real Xavier—would want this. He knows what’s at stake. We all do. I can’t see any other option.”

“There’s got to be another way,” Maxine quipped. “There just has to be. We aren’t going down like this.”

“Excuse me guys,” Scott butted in. Maxine and Charlotte turned their heads simultaneously. “Something just occurred to me.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Charlotte fired. “The adults are talking.”

“Scott, I really don’t care what just occurred to you.”

“It’s just that—”

Maxine held up her hand. “No!” She looked at Charlotte dead in the eye, could just about cut the connection between them with a knife. Eventually, she nodded, and Charlotte followed.

Scott stood as a shrill tone sounded in the room.

Maxine, with a quizzical look on her face, pulled out her phone. She did a double take when she saw the name on the screen, then answered it, turning on the loudspeaker so they could all hear it.

“Hello?”

The line crackled, like the caller’s device was flipping end over end down a flight of aluminum steps. There was some coughing.

“Hello?” the person wheezed. “Maxine, is that you?”

Maxine’s eyes went wide. “Jacob?”

Coughed again. Rased. Fought for breath. “Yeah.”

“Shit! Where are you? How are you alive?”

“Maxine, listen to me. You can’t—”

Then another voice came on the line.

“Hello, Maxine. It’s very nice to talk to you again. It was certainly disappointing you and Scott escaped from the facility, especially when we were making such a deep connection.”

“Xander. What the fuck do you want?”

“I want what we all want. An end to all of this.”

“I somehow doubt our respective views on what the end looks like, are the same.”

“Perhaps... or maybe we aren’t as different as you think we are. Regardless, I have a proposition for you.”

Maxine looked over Charlotte and Scott, who were gazing at the phone in her hand.

“We don’t negotiate with terrorists!” Charlotte roared down the line.

“Oh, it’s you, Charlotte. So damn sassy all the time. Anyway, this might be one of those times you may want to reconsider your stance on negotiations.”

“What do you want?” Maxine asked.

“Well, quite simply, I have something you want, and you have something I want. I’m assuming you want Jacob here, right? Because if you don’t, I’m more than happy to blow his brains out right now.”

The sound of a slide being clicked into place echoed through the phone and into the room.

“Do it,” Jacob roared. “Pull the fucking trigger. I dare you, motherfucker.”

This time, when Maxine looked up, they met her gaze.

“What do you say, Maxine? Should I just pull the trigger? Honor Jacob’s wishes?”

“No!” Maxine shouted. “What do you want?” Deep down she knew. It was glaringly obvious. They wanted Xavier. Always have. Would stop at nothing to get him.

“A simple trade, Jacob for Xavier.”

“What makes you think we would give up Xavier for Jacob?” Charlotte asked.

“Because I’ll throw in ten million dollars in cash to boot. Cash. For each of you. An opportunity to walk away from all of this pain, all of this bloodshed. Start lives over.”

It made Scott think back to the interrogation at the facility. Xander promised him a new life with untold riches. An opportunity to reset.

“No!” Charlotte shouted into the phone. “Ten isn’t enough. I have plans and Xavier promised me a hell of a lot more than ten million. I want fifty!”

Brief silence.

“Each? And Jacob?” More silence. “Fine. Provided I get Xavier, I can do this. I’ll send through the coordinates. You have two hours.”

The line went silent. Call disconnected.

They looked at each other. Xavier always said the mission was bigger than any of them. That their lives, except that of Scott for some explicable reason, was worth losing so the mission could continue.

“Fifty million dollars?” Maxine quipped.

“I didn’t want to appear easy,” Charlotte replied.

“Do you think he knows?” Scott mused.

“Knows what?” Maxine asked.

“That we have two Xaviers. Do you think he knows?”

“What does it matter?”

“Maybe it doesn’t matter,” Scott said as he paced the office. “But we can’t go through with this. Unless we know for sure, we could end up handing over our Xavier instead of the symbiote. And in either case, we’re giving them Xavier’s knowledge. They will know what he knows. About you guys. About all of this. That can’t be a good thing.”

“Wait,” Maxine said, a devilish grin sweeping across her face. “There is a way. If we know which is our Xavier, there is a way we can do this.”

“What did you have in mind?” Charlotte asked.

“You leave that to me. You just figure out which one is the imposter.”

“And what if we can’t?”

Maxine’s expression turned dark. “Then we execute them both and Xander kills Jacob.”

Worst possible case. A dose of reality.

Maxine’s phone signaled a message had arrived. They gathered around the device to see what it was.

“Longitude and latitude,” Charlotte said. “But what’s that last bit? A mistake?”

“That’s no mistake. That’s the altitude.”

“Guys,” Scott interrupted. “I think I know who it is.”

“Who what is?” Maxine asked.

“The symbiote. I’ve figured it out.”

“Wait,” Charlotte announced, as if something just occurred to her. “How do you know about the symbiotes?”

Chapter 32

Charlotte leveled out the Blackhawk helicopter and descended it to the required height, holding steady a few feet from the skyscraper rooftop. So close she could just about reach out and touch it. She narrowed her eyes at the navigation lights of the partner aircraft holding an identical position a hundred feet ahead.

Maxine sat in one of the troop seats next to Scott. In one hand was her phone, in the other a gun. It wouldn't be long before they would make the swap, and she hoped Scott was right about his assumptions. He wouldn't get a second chance. None of them would, but there was no other choice. Because of the connection between White and Black Xavier, she kept them both, gagged, hooded, and bound until the swap was complete. And despite their constraints, maintained a high level of vigilance.

The phone vibrated in her hand as it rang. She removed her headset and answered it.

"What's the play?"

A crackle. "Simple," Xander said. "We drop our respective packages, swap positions, and pick them up. Easy as that. Then we fly off into the sunset and we never have to see each other again."

"Easy as that," Maxine repeated.

"Make your move and head to the neutral position. When you're clear, we'll do the same."

The line went dead.

She repositioned the headphones and unbuckled herself. "Okay, Charlotte. Just hold it steady, we're going to make the drop."

Charlotte acknowledged the request.

Maxine looked at the two Xaviers, then to Scott. "Last chance. There's no backing out once we make the drop."

“I’m no more certain or unsure of the decision than I was two hours ago.”

Maxine pondered it for a second before nodding. “Get it ready,” she said as she slid the cargo door open. A roaring gale entered the cabin, ripping between the occupants.

Scott awkwardly unbuckled Black Xavier, and with the help of Maxine, carried him to the door. The hooded man’s boots dragged along the cabin floor, his hands bound behind his back.

Maxine dropped onto the roof, then turned and grabbed the Zed’s legs. They carried him across the roof and propped him up against a vent. Rushed back to the helicopter and prepared to pick up Jacob.

“Alright, Charlotte,” Maxine spoke into the microphone. “Take us around.”

“Roger that,” she replied.

Charlotte eased the cyclic, laterally shifting into open airspace. She watched as the other’s cargo door bay opened, and they dropped a hooded muscular man onto the roof. He landed heavily, rolling onto his side, before standing up. They dropped three gym bags at his feet.

“All packages dropped,” Charlotte announced.

Xander’s helicopter shifted around and made a beeline for their target. Charlotte replicated the move.

“We’re heading in,” she said. “Get ready.”

Just before landing, Charlotte rotated the helicopter so Maxine could view the other roof through the cargo door. They landed lightly. Xander jumped out. Marched directly over to Xavier, pulled a weapon, and shot him. Xavier seemed to stiffen at first, then fall to the roof. Other Zeds quickly ran to carry the shocked body back to their ride.

Following this, Charlotte immediately touched the wheels down on the small roof area, and Maxine jumped out. She ran over to

Jacob and yanked off the hood. Their gaze met, and she threw her arms around him, finding a moment of humanity in the crazy world Xavier exposed her to.

But then she stopped.

Slowly backed away.

“No,” she mumbled.

Jacob saw the look in her eyes. “What is it?” he yelled over the propeller wash.

“Your neck,” she yelled. “On the back of your neck.”

“What? What are you talking about?” He reached up with bound hands and clumsily ran fingers along his neck.

Wide eyes met again. They both knew what would happen next. What had to be done.

She drew her weapon and pointed it at him. “I’m... I’m so sorry, Jacob.”

“What are you doing?” Scott yelled from the helicopter.

Tears welled. Hands shook. Trained to kill. Programed to murder. Now forced to execute her friend. She wasn’t sure she could.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You don’t have to.”

Jacob glanced toward the cockpit and smiled mournfully before bowing his head. With a deep breath, he took off in a sprint towards the edge of the building. When he got to the edge, he bounded off the ledge and closed his eyes.

Maxine watched her friend disappear into the abyss that was the night, his body quickly disappearing over the edge. He willed to take his own life rather than place the burden on someone else, and Maxine hoped she’d be as strong when the time came for her to do the same thing.

Rage burned deep within her, coating the pain in the pit of her stomach. She marched towards the other building, firing indiscriminately at the Zeds helicopter. The 9mm rounds pinged off the armor plating.

“Fuck you!” she screamed into the night. The slide locked back. She stared across the void. Narrow eyes. Deep, purposeful breaths. Adrenalin crashing through her.

The phone rang.

“I’m going to kill you myself,” she answered, staring at Xander hanging out of the cargo bay.

Xander laughed. “It was quite the show,” he said. “I’ve got the whole thing on camera. Think I’ll masturbate over it tonight.”

The line went dead as the Zeds helicopter powered down and lifted off the building’s roof.

“Enjoy Xavier, you sick fuck,” she said under her breath, as she dialed a different number in her phone.

The helicopter suddenly lurched sideways, tipping away from the building. Something flew from the cargo bay just as the aircraft exploded. A huge fireball consumed the beast, sending shrapnel in all directions. The destructive flash enveloped the flying man who vanished in the blast.

Scott appeared at her side. “I don’t understand what just happened to Jacob,” he said.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’re going to kill them,” she said. “Kill them all. We’re going to hunt those fuckers down, one by one. We’re going to grind them into the earth until they beg us to kill them.”

With hatred burning like an oil fire, she marched off towards the helicopter. A dejected Charlotte sat in the cockpit, scanning the instrument panel, unable to make eye contact.

White Xavier, the Xavier, stood by the cargo door. Their eyes met briefly before he gently touched her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Maxine. Sorry it had to come to this. Jacob was a warrior.”

Maxine shrugged it off.

“I know you’re upset,” Xavier continued. “We know we’re putting our lives at risk because of this fight.”

She looked up. “Well, now it’s time to take the war to them.”

Jumping into the bay, she roughly put on the headset.

“Fly back over,” she ordered. “I want to make sure all those assholes are dead.”

Scott threw himself into the cargo bay. “What about the money,” he asked. “There’s a hundred and fifty million in cash just sitting there.”

“It was never about the money,” Maxine said. “It was about Jacob. His death taints that money. It paid for his death.”

The aircraft lifted for a survey run of the other building. When Charlotte noticed something, she broadcasted her findings over the system.

The streets surrounding the building were filling with red and blue flashing lights of emergency services. People had stopped, hoping to record a secondary explosion on their phones, while others had run for their lives. Wreckage lay strewn for blocks, with bits of steel sticking out of roadway, vehicles, and unfortunate souls who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As Charlotte set the helicopter down, Maxine turned to Xavier. “Best you wait here. We don’t know if they think you’re dead or alive. If they think you’re dead, I want to keep it that way.” Then she turned to Scott. “You wait here as well. I’m doing this on my own. For Jacob.”

She exited and strode over the roof towards the edge. She could make out fingers gripping the edge.

The burnt and bloodied Xander looked up into a face and a muzzle.

“I don’t suppose you want to help me up do you?”

“I’m going to watch you die,” Maxine retorted. “Quickly or slowly, I don’t mind.”

“If you help me up, I’ll tell you anything you want to know. About Zero Division. About The Circle. You could know it all.”

“No, you won’t,” Maxine quipped. “We’ll spend our time interrogating you to get nothing useful. It’ll be a complete waste of our time and effort.”

Xander coughed mid-laugh. “Well, yeah. You got me there.” He grunted.

“Do you want me to count to three?” Maxine asked.

“This is your last chance,” he said boldly. “Take the money and disappear. Take yourself away from all of this death and mayhem. You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do,” Maxine replied. “You wouldn’t believe how badly I do.”

Xander coughed. “We really are similar, you and me.”

She snarled and jammed the butt of her gun down on his hand. Xander cried out. Again, and again she smashed it down until he had to let go. Xander swung from one hand, fingers losing grip. He looked down to the street a thousand feet below. Ants scurried between vehicles. Sirens echoed.

They looked at each other.

With his free hand, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small device. “You can’t win,” he said, as he pressed the button.

A boom echoed between the buildings, shattering several windows. Maxine looked over to the other rooftop to see burning pieces of paper fluttering in the black nothingness. The entire top of the other roof was missing; a crater in its place.

Xander winced. “God damn it. One fucking step ahead,” he coughed. “But this isn’t the end. It never will be.”

“It is for you,” she avowed.

One by one Maxine peeled his fingers from the edge until he could hold no longer. Xander fell backward, the view of Maxine waving goodbye getting smaller and smaller. Then she pointed her gun.

He saw his reflection in the glass and wondered how long it would be before he hit the pavement. In a split second, he thought he saw his own head explode from a bullet. Or maybe it was some wonderful dream.

Maxine observed the spray of body fluids over the pavement before pulling back from the edge.

Chapter 33

2 hours earlier

“The real Xavier. I think I’ve figured it out,” Scott proclaimed.

“Wait,” Charlotte said. “How do you know about the symbiotes?”

“What?” asked Scott.

“The symbiotes. You mentioned it before and you said it just then. That all we needed to do was to hand over the symbiote. Neither Maxine nor myself used that word.”

Scott shrugged. “I don’t know. I must have heard it through the walls or something.”

Maxine stepped forward. “No, no, no. Those rooms are sound-proof. Trust me on that. So how did you know?”

“I really don’t know,” he said. “But I guess it’s the same way I now know who the real Xavier is.”

“And how do you know?”

“I looked at the behaviors. Just like Xavier told us to.”

“No,” said Charlotte. “Once again, that’s what the two Xaviers told Maxine and me. We haven’t spoken about that out here. So, tell us again, how you know.”

Scott stepped back, almost fearful of the other two. “I don’t know, I really don’t. I just...” He stopped. It couldn’t say it out loud. It was too ridiculous.

“Just what?”

He took a breath. “I just heard the voices in my head.”

Maxine and Charlotte looked at each other.

“What the hell does that mean?” Charlotte asked.

No one knew the answer, least of all Scott.

“Perhaps if we figure out who the right Xavier is, he can tell us,” Maxine said. “It might be something, it might be nothing.”

“As I was saying,” Scott said. “I think I know which Xavier is the imposter.”

“How certain are you?”

He shrugged. “As certain as I can be.”

“Tell us,” Charlotte demanded.

“The Xavier wearing the black flight suit. From the facility. That’s the imposter.”

Maxine stepped back. “He was the one that helped us escape,” she said.

“But,” Charlotte posed. “Maybe he did that to get him close to the real Xavier. To eliminate him. Besides, when you and your entourage appeared at the safe house, we’d just finished planning on how we were going to rescue you and Scott.”

“Or,” Maxine jumped in. “It was a ruse to get us all together and wipe us all out at the same time. No loose ends. Clean. Besides, he always said our lives were dispensable in order for the mission to continue.”

“But he always said Scott was so damn important,” Charlotte rebutted.

“Not just important,” Maxine said. “On the shuttle out of the facility, Xavier said Scott was crucial.”

“So, they know Scott is an extremely important asset for us and willingly let him go from their grasps? I don’t buy that,” Charlotte said.

“Or they don’t know, and took a guess to appease Scott,” Maxine added.

“Or it’s the real Xavier.” They both shrugged.

They turned away from each other, deep in their own heads, rationalizing the data, boiling it down. Time was ticking, and they

needed to decide. Flipping a coin wouldn't be good enough. Taking a chance would only get you so far, and if they messed this decision up, there would be no hope for them. Failure would be imminent.

"Or," Scott interjected. "They didn't willingly let me go."

Maxine turned. "When me and Xavier found you at the facility, he told you where you met and some conflict you've faced. So, how can you be so sure?"

"Those were all things both sides would know. Real or fake. Besides, from the moment I met Xavier, he's called me Mr. Harris. Annoys the shit out of me."

"So?" Charlotte huffed.

"Well, on the shuttle from the facility, he kept calling me Scott."

"Really?" Charlotte asked. "We're basing the future of this mission, on the fate of the entire world, on how someone refers to you?"

"Habits," Maxine said. "Xavier said to look for the habits. It might be exiguous, but it's all we've got."

Charlotte took a deep breath. "Right. If this is the decision we're making, what's your plan?"

Maxine casually walked into the room. Black Xavier eyed her curiously.

"So," he said. "Have you decided?"

"We have," she said. Rounded the table. Stood behind the prisoner.

"And? What is it? Are you going to eliminate the imposter?"

"Oh, yes."

Maxine jammed the syringe into the Zed's neck and let the effects of the substance take hold. Within seconds, the Zed lost control of his muscles, falling face-first onto the table. At the sound of the impact, the door opened and Charlotte walked in carrying the small, but powerful, explosives.

“How much do you think we need?” she asked.

Maxine looked at her.

“All of it.”

Chapter 34

2 hours later

“Remarkable,” Xavier mused. “My symbiote was correct, you are crucial for this mission. Whether Zero Division know that, we’ll never know. But if they did, and they left you alive just to get to me? Well, that’s an enormous gamble. And one that didn’t pay off.”

“Why could I hear you?” Scott asked. “Why could I hear your voices inside my head?”

“You have remarkable abilities, Scott. More than you could imagine. Remember at the facility when I told you your specialty was espionage and analytics? And how disappointed you were?”

“So, I can read minds? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Not exactly. Let me explain.”

A series of shrill alarms. Charlotte’s voice yelled over the intercom system as the helicopter lurched one way then the next.

“Brace for impact! Brace for impact!” she yelled.

He watched his symbiote dangle from the edge of the building. There was nothing he could do for him at this stage, he was well and truly doomed. His attention was on the girl, Maxine, who was standing by, waiting for his symbiote to fall to his death. Xavier was dead, leaving a few rebellious figures to fly the flag. However, without Xavier, they wouldn’t be successful. His symbiote was correct. There is no hope for them.

He leaned against the dark SUV and waited. He saw it before he felt it. A flash of light, before the warm gush of wind, followed by a hailstorm of glass. He stood through it all. It was too early to make his move. They'd be gone by the time he got to the roof. And he wanted a clear shot to remove them all at once, so their plans could continue unincumbered. No more distractions. No more annoying flies buzzing around his head.

One moment his symbiote was hanging, then falling backward into the night sky. A quarter of the way down, his head snapped back, a cloud of mist evaporating in the descent. Screams as locals witnessed the inevitable. The squelching smack of a soft body on concrete was sudden, yet expected.

He watched Maxine walk away from the ledge and out of sight. He reached into the SUV and extracted the Grom, a portable guided missile launcher. With the systems warmed up, he waited for the regular thump of rotor blades. He aimed at the night sky in the direction the helicopter arrived. Being surrounded by skyscrapers, he'd have few windows in which to launch the missile, but it would take a mere second to lock onto the target, then the guidance system would figure it out from there.

Then he saw it. The underside of the whale floating majestically in the black sea. He shifted his viewing angle and locked onto the target. With a smirk running across his face, he depressed the launcher.

With a flash, the missile ejected from the launcher. A second later, the rocket ignition kicked in, creating a trailing flame that propelled the rocket towards the target. He had succeeded where his symbiote had failed. There would be nothing stopping them now.

“Using laser countermeasures,” Charlotte yelled over the series of alarms engulfing the cockpit and flashing on the instrument panel.

She banked the heavy machine left, then right. Seconds feeling like minutes. Then impact.

The helicopter lurched forward. The tail of the helicopter all but destroyed. Plumes of black smoke flowed from the rear of the aircraft and disappeared against the black backdrop.

“We’re hit,” Charlotte yelled. Further alarms flooded the panel, as the Blackhawk spun uncontrollably to the left. “Brace!”

Charlotte rolled off the throttle to counter the spin and fought to keep her world straight. With forward speed arrested, she looked out over the buildings and desperately sought somewhere to bring the bird down. She needed some space. The helicopter was going to skid, and the potential for rollover was high. And with their current altitude and rate of descent, it was an ominous position to be in.

Up ahead, the bright lights of a shopping center parking lot. Late night shoppers scattered their vehicles across the area. Shopping carts lay in wait for someone to collect them. It was going to be a tight fit, but there wouldn’t be any other option. Flight time was critical, and any space, regardless of the suitability, was better than crashing into a building.

“Hold on,” she yelled into the headset. “We’re going down.”

Maxine pulled out a device from her pocket and handed it to Scott. “Just in case you need this.”

Scott looked at it and smiled. It seemed like a great time to yank himself from reality. He extracted the buds and worked them into his ears. Once again, they seemed to grow into him, weaving up his canals and wrap around the eardrum. He clicked on the application.

Scott threw himself against the decaying brick wall of the remnant outpost. Next to him, Woodward landed heavily and emitted a dull groan. Scott peer around the corner at the military compound. Spotlights waved back and forth; security cameras pointed in every direc-

tion. There appeared to be a single entrance guarded by a K-9 unit. Dogs would stop and sniff the air before giving up and resumed pacing with their handlers. A selection of four-wheel drives were parked against a wall of the compound.

He resumed his position and pushed his back against the wall. He pulled back his sleeve to check his watch. Tapped his earpiece. "Maxine, are you in position?"

"Almost," she said.

Suddenly, a figure floated down from the inky blackness of the sky. Dressed all in black, she unbuckled the parachute constraints and removed her night vision goggles.

"Maxine?" Scott asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I just heard they have returned Krantz," she said, striding towards them.

Scott rubbed his chin and covertly tapped his earpiece.

"Where did you hear that?" Woodward asked. "I haven't received the communication."

"You will," she said. "Just came through my channel. They dumped him out of a moving car near HQ. He's in pretty awful shape."

The woman's head exploded suddenly, with the high velocity, full metal jacket bullet piercing the side of her head. A spray of brain ejected into the night before she slumped over.

"Thank you for that, Maxine."

"Don't mention it. I guess we need to be prepared for that."

Scott and Woodward glanced at each other. They simultaneously drew their weapons and pointed them into each other's faces.

"Honduras, 2005," Woodward said. "The church, the goat, and the gang member."

"Spenser Forston," Scott spat out. "Caracas, 2001. The pedophile and the bridge."

"An icepick," Woodward instantly replied.

They both lowered their weapons.

“Can we concentrate on the mission please?” Maxine crackled through their earpieces.

“Andrik’s adamant Krantz is inside. He thinks the plan is to clone him so they can siphon information to help their cause, if not take over clandestine operations. They’d be unstoppable.”

“And what exactly is their cause?” Woodward asked.

Scott shrugged. “Fucked if I know. Take over the world, I guess. But we need to get in there and destroy the building. Full frontal assault. Maxine, you’ll provide cover and support. We’ll cut in through the main entrance. I’ll find Krantz while Woodward lays the charges. Retreat with a vehicle and pick up Maxine on the way out. Copy?”

“Copy that,” Woodward said. Maxine repeated.

“On my mark.”

Scott took a deep breath, held a gun in each hand, and steadied himself.

“Go!”

The insanity commenced immediately. Scott and Woodward darted from their concealed safety. Guards dropped before them; puffs of red danced in the air as their heads exploded. They took care of the rest, firing indiscriminately into their faces. Klaxons sounded throughout the complex. Scott stood guard as Woodward landed against the heavy metal door, pulled out a metal vapor torch, and began hitting the weak points.

Maxine would call out oncoming threats and Scott would kill them indiscriminately. She would dispatch the remainder with considerable ease. Above the compound, a flash of light blossomed in the night sky. Shortly after, a puff of dirt kicked up beside her.

“Shit. I’m made,” she communicated. “Counter sniper on the roof. Shifting to Zulu. You’re on your own.”

“We’re in,” Woodward shouted.

The pair entered the darkened space. Disorientating warning lights flashed. They split up, with Woodward disappearing through a doorway. Scott clambered down a flight of stairs. Bullets pinged off the railing and followed his every footstep. He glided along the walkway and through an open door, just as a barrage of gunfire sparked around him.

Scott pulled out a shock grenade and threw it out the door.

“Cover, cover, cover,” he said into his mic, as he hunkered into the corner of the room and placed his hands over his ears.

The explosive turned end over end in the air. Into the chasm, it fell. For a moment it hung in the air, still turning over itself. Then, following a burst of light, an ear-piercing scream, a pulsating force ripped in every direction. Metal railings bent and glass exploded. The explosion instantly cut in half those unlucky enough to be in its glide path. Eyeballs melted. Ears bled. Faces sheared or burnt to a crisp. A devastating blast.

Scott evacuated the room quickly. Time was always against him, and like always, had no idea what he was about to come to. Down a set of mangled stairs, over bodies missing vital components. Past a groaning mess that was missing half its face. Towards a steel door hanging off its hinges.

Inside he found Krantz. Unconscious and naked, he was seated in something that resembled a dental chair. Wires connected to every part of his body. Photos of Krantz, x-rays, brain patterns, and mapping visuals lined the walls.

A hand appeared next to Krantz. Slowly, a woman pulled herself up, her free hand rubbing the side of her head. Hangover from the explosives. Strands of gray hung over her wrinkled face, and she lazily pushed them back. Wiped the drool flowing over her lips. Patted down her coat. Noticed Scott standing at the door, a weapon trained on her.

“It’s too late for you,” she said in a croaky voice. A long blink. “It’s already done.” She pointed to a door with a viewing panel in it.

Scott, while keeping the doctor covered with his weapon, shifted to the portal and looked inside. Fifty bodies lined the walls of what looked to Scott like a cold room. Tubes ran from ceiling to every orifice. Some of them looked like Krantz.

Scott turned and pointed to Krantz with a gun. “Get him out of that contraption.”

“I’m afraid that’s just not possible.”

“Then I’ll do it myself.”

“If you remove just one of those wires, he’s as good as dead. He’s part of the system now, integrated with the network. They share neural pathways. Their hearts beat as one. Removing him won’t destroy the network, but his life will be as good as dead.”

Scott moved towards her. Lifted the gun. Held it between her eyes. “You are going to help me or you are going to regret it.”

She smiled. White teeth showing between pale lips. “You’ve made your move. And now there are no other moves to make. You think you’ve succeeded? You are mistaken. There are hundreds of laboratories just like this, that you’ll never find.”

“And after you help me with Krantz, you are going to tell me where they are.”

She reached for a scalpel sitting on a tray.

“Don’t do it,” said Scott, edging closer.

In a swift motion, she ran the scalpel along her throat. A squirt of blood burst out over the medical equipment. She gurgled happily before collapsing to the floor, blood continuing to flow from her.

“What’s happening, sir?” Woodward enquired as he entered the room. “The explosives are ready. We need to go.”

“Woodward! Quick! Find some way of getting as much of this equipment together as possible. Apparently, he’ll die if we rip him out of it.”

Woodward looked at the lifeless body on the floor. “You believe her?”

“I don’t have time to question it. Just carry as much as you can. Hopefully, Maria can do something.”

With Krantz over his shoulder and a gun in hand, Scott marched out of the room. Close behind, Woodward carried an armful of electronic devices. Some cables to Krantz’s body were hard-wired into the wall, and so had to take the chance of cutting the connection.

Over the dead bodies, up distorted stairs, along ruined walkways, and eventually out into the night air. Maxine had commandeered a vehicle and was waiting near the entrance. The engine grumbled in tune with the warning alarms that sounded. Woodward loaded Krantz and the equipment into the back of the vehicle.

“Scott?” Maxine said.

Scott stopped and spun around gun up.

“Do you think you can just drive away from here?”

The man’s black combat uniform was torn and bloodied. Scott’s attack had burnt off half his face, and when he spoke, a line of spit ran down onto his chest. He held a gun against Maxine’s head.

“Do it,” Maxine said to Scott. “Shoot me.”

The man snickered, then coughed, blood spurting out of his mouth and over Maxine’s shoulder. “He can’t. Could never sacrifice one of this own team. That’s why he will lose.”

“Shoot!” Maxine ordered. “Krantz is what’s important. Do it.”

Scott swayed. Felt like the world was shifting under his feet. “Do you feel that?”

“Shoot!”

Fought hard to keep his gun straight.

“Shoot!”

“I.. I can’t.”

“For fuck’s sake, Scott. Shoot!”

His vision snapped back. Looking out the rear window of a vehicle, a body clung to the roof. The SUV shuddered left, then right.

“Pull the damn trigger!” Maxine yelled.

He felt the textured synthetic material in his palm. Ran his finger over the trigger. He lifted the weapon.

“Shoot that fucker!”

Closed his eyes. Pulled the trigger. The rear window smashed. The bullet sending their uninvited guest flying backward onto the roadway. The recoil sent heavy vibrations through his arm and he dropped the gun immediately.

As the SUV sped off, he noted the tumbling body came to a complete rest. Slowly, it stood up on its feet and watched.

Commotion swirled around Scott, fought with the ringing in his ears. He turned. Maxine gunned the vehicle down an empty street.

“We need to get her to a hospital,” Maxine yelled.

“It’s too dangerous,” Xavier responded from the back seat.

“She’s losing too much blood!” Maxine shouted over her shoulder.

“I know where to take her,” Xavier fired back.

Scott looked down. Blood covered every surface. Charlotte looked up with lifeless eyes. Xavier pressed down over a gaping hole in her chest. Blood poured around his fingers.

“I hope you’re right, Xavier.”

“Me too,” he breathed.

“I’m not losing anyone else tonight,” she said. “No one else. Not Charlotte. Not tonight.”

“Scott!” Xavier yelled. “Don’t just stand there. Reach over and apply pressure to her stomach.”

That’s when he saw it, a piece of metal sticking out of her. The helicopter landing must have been catastrophic.

As the SUV darted through the deserted city streets under Xavier's direction, Scott knew the war was only just beginning. And before it was over, he'd certainly be dead.

MORTALITY

“To suspect your own mortality is to know the beginning of terror,
to learn irrefutably that you are mortal is to know the end of terror.”

Frank Herbert

“Lord, what fools these mortals be!”

William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

Chapter 35

A week earlier

They stood by and waited. Watched as their target shuffled into the male bathrooms on the concourse. Observed as their Zero Division operative followed him inside a few seconds later. The instructions were clear and absolute. They needed total care with the target, for reasons they didn't quite understand. Still, it wasn't their place. They had a job to do, orders to fulfill.

Leaning against a column pretending to read a newspaper, Xian covertly looked over to his symbiote and ran a hand over his bald head. On the other side of the concourse, amidst a constant flow of traffic in every direction, his symbiote gave an imperceptible nod. Everything was going to the plan, exactly as Veronica informed them. They would soon secure the target.

But then Xian held this breath as he watched Xavier walk into the bathrooms. That was definitely not part of the plan. He could feel the unease in his symbiote. Two different perspectives aligning into a single stream of consciousness.

Xian extracted his device and redialed the last number.

"We have an unwelcome guest."

The reply was instant. "*Can you deal with the guest without interfering with the target?*"

"Yes."

"*Who is the guest?*"

"Xavier."

"*Are there any other uninvited guests that you've identified?*"

Xian and his symbiote immediately scanned the area. Wall to wall. Corner to corner.

“Uncertain,” he replied. “But possible.”

“We cannot risk Xavier tampering with the asset. Proceed with caution. Target is a level one asset.”

The line went dead. Nothing to say or do. The decision was entirely out of their hands. They followed orders, not questioned them.

Xavier emerged from the bathroom with their target close behind, struggling to keep up. They sneered from their vantage points. Information flowed freely into and out of Xian’s brain. Scenarios discussed in real time without a single word being said. They could do it. It would be easy. One deals with Xavier while the other takes ownership of the target. Being a level one asset meant they would need to execute with care and properly manage the target before execution. It might cause a scene, but the results would be worth it.

A sudden sharp pain in his neck. Instant impact. Breathing difficult. Vision blurry. Fingers numb. Felt his body fall back, caught by a chair. *Chair? There wasn’t a chair there before.* His view shifted, and he had no control over it. Pointed towards where his symbiote was standing, but he wasn’t there. Tried to tell him to run. Communication loss. Transmission lost to white noise.

Light and sound danced around him as an invisible force wheeled him between hordes of people, each too eager to reach their destinations to notice him. Light interjected with indistinct shadows. Sound swayed to a complete standstill until there was only ringing in his ears.

Xian hid himself behind a wide column the moment someone attacked his symbiote. It was sudden and unforeseen. The communication channel had closed, so he was no better than any other mortal. Peering around his cover, he saw the attacker. He knew her

name, and her capabilities. That information was common knowledge amongst their ranks. They had thought if Xavier was there, that Maxine wouldn't be far behind.

His plan was relatively simple. He would circle around and attack her from behind, break her neck before she knew what was happening. It would be so sudden that none of the passersby would even notice her die in his arms.

The sound of squeaking tires over hard concourse flooring signaled him. Like a siren's call, he couldn't resist. Tracing around the column, he leapt out... to find his symbiote in a wheelchair, but no Maxine.

He spun to face her, stared into her eyes as she pushed the needle into his neck. Noted her smirk as numbness swept over his body. He fell backward, landing on top of his symbiote. Watched the world go by. Light and shadow danced.

No control of his movements.

Alone in his thoughts.

Dead to the world.

Chapter 36

A week later

Scott pressed down on Charlotte's blood-soaked clothes as the Jeep jostled over uneven ground. He had no idea what he was doing or if he was doing anything to help at all. Xavier shouted orders. Maxine swung the car left, then right. City lights diminished into darkness. Highways into dual lane carriageways. Buildings into empty blocks of land. Road signs flashed by so quickly he had no hope of knowing where he was.

Charlotte's body convulsed, and Xavier pushed down harder. Blood spurt out of her mouth. Pupils enlarged. "We're losing her," he shouted.

"How much farther?" Maxine shouted.

"Next exit. Not far," came Xavier's machine gun response. "Look for a yellow strip mall."

Scott closed his eyes and tried to pretend he was anywhere else... touching anything else. The thought of him working with Charlotte's insides made him sick. As much as he wanted them all to be safe and well, he wanted it all to be over as quickly as possible.

Rapid flashes of light lit up the interior of the vehicle as Maxine thundered down the road.

"Where?" Maxine yelled.

"Go round the back," Xavier yelled. "A green door."

The four-wheel-drive clipped the curb and bounced over the entryway as Maxine navigated the parking lot traffic islands. The roadway narrowed into a single lane as she followed signs to loading bays.

"Here!" Xavier shouted.

Maxine smashed the brakes and the big car skidded to a halt outside a solitary door. The light above it was on—more of a deterrent to aspiring thieves than anything else.

“Maxine!” Xavier shouted. “Help me!”

Maxine reached between the front seats and pushed down on a bloody pool as Xavier jumped out. He thumped on the green door repeatedly with bloody fists. Shouted out a name that was as unfamiliar to Scott as their surroundings. The wait was agonizing. A few seconds later, a light in the second-floor window came on.

Half a minute later, after sliding and turning of locks, the door pushed open. A bearded short man wearing a dressing gown and slippers stepped out.

“What?” he cried. “What is it?”

“Granthom!” Xavier shouted. “We need you.”

The man scrunched his beard and adjusted his thick-lensed glasses. “Xavier?” he said. “Is that you? I told you, never to—.”

“It’s Charlotte!” Xavier interrupted. “We need you.” He stepped to the side.

Granthom peered through the open rear doors of the four-wheel drive. Saw two people pressing down on a third. Blood everywhere.

“What the hell happened?”

“Long story,” Xavier said. “But she’s dying! She needs your help.”

“Well, don’t just stand there,” he said. “Bring her in.”

With blood-stained hands, the three of them carried Charlotte inside. Granthom waddled ahead of them, pushing trolleys and other equipment out of the way. Scott noted the cages that lined the walls. Glass door refrigerators that shone a brilliance into the room, illuminating a series of mismatched couches and chairs. They shuffled along the linoleum floors and through swinging double doors into a room where the lights were charging. Vital seconds from gloom to full power.

“Put her down on the table,” Granthom instructed. “Be careful... be careful.” He placed an oxygen mask over her face. Pushed two fingers into her neck. “Pulse. Slight, but there.”

Granthom flicked a switch and twin surgical lights crackled on. “Okay, let’s see what we have here.” He moved them around to get a good look at the damage. Grasped a pair of surgical scissors and started cutting away the red-drenched material from Charlotte’s unresponsive body. Placed some pads on her chest to get determine her vitals.

“Maxine,” Granthom instructed as he pointed. “Get the morphine and epinephrine. In the fridge over there. Xavier, get some gauze. I’ll probably need some clamps and forceps.”

“What do you want me to do?” Scott asked, the scene a blur around him.

“Grab that,” Granthom replied, pointing to the piece of metal sticking out of Charlotte’s stomach. “On the count of three, you’re going to pull it out.”

“What? Shouldn’t you do tests first or something?”

“She’ll be dead by then. We don’t have time for this.”

“It’s just that—.”

Granthom looked at Xavier. “Does he even know yet?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Fuck!” He turned back to Scott. “Listen, if you don’t pull that out when I tell you to, Charlotte is going to die.” Scott gently placed his hands on the metal. “Xavier, get ready for the gauze. I’m going to need you to clean the area. I need to get in there and see what’s what. Maxine, prepare the adrenalin. We might need to kick start something.”

Scott took a deep breath. Just another task he wasn’t prepared for, another situation he had never been in.

“Straight out,” Granthom ordered. “Understand?”

Scott nodded.

Granthom gave the order. Scott heaved upwards. The metal came free with a squelch, allowing a geyser of blood to spew out of the newly created hole. Xavier clamped down with the gauze. Charlotte's heart rate on the EKG machine increased wildly, the beeps sounding rapidly.

"Oh god, I think I'm going to be sick," Scott announced.

"Well, don't do it in here," Granthom barked. "I've got enough on my plate without worrying about you."

Scott backed away.

"I've got to get in there," Granthom said. "To investigate internal damage."

Scott reached for a bench top. The view of the emergency surgical scene looked like someone had smeared Vaseline on his eyeballs. The sound of a long beep distorted his view as he turned for the swinging doors.

"Adrenalin," Granthom called out. "We're losing her."

The last thing he saw was Maxine plunging a syringe into Charlotte's leg.

Then he saw the doors.

Then he saw the floor.

Then he saw nothing.

Chapter 37

Wet and slippery. That was the feeling that ran across his face in quick, successive bursts. Then it went down to his lips like it was breaking into his mouth to steal something. Scott opened his eyelids to see two large brown eyes staring back.

“Jesus!” he yelled as he scrambled away from the creature. With a banging in his chest and extreme lucidity hitting him like a truck, he gasped as the puppy padded away across the floor to the opposite chair.

Maxine reached down and picked it up. It nestled down on her lap and closed its eyes.

“You intrigue me, Scott,” she said. “Right from the beginning, from the very first time I saw you.”

Scott looked around at the cages that lined the walls. They were full of dogs and cats, still slumbering in the twilight hours.

“Where the hell are we?” Given the fast-paced commotion, he hadn’t taken in his surroundings.

“I’m sure if you can put all those wonderful espionage and analytical skills to the test, you’d be able to figure it out,” Maxine snarked.

Scott looked again. “Christ, are we inside a vet clinic?”

Maxine nodded.

“Did a vet save Charlotte’s life?” Then the question hit him. “Shit, is she okay?”

Maxine looked down at the puppy and patted it gently. “Yes. For now.”

Scott took a deep breath and rearranged himself on the couch. “Why are we at a vet? Of all places?”

“Because this is where Xavier told me to go.”

“But... a vet? Not some doctor on the mafia payroll or something?”

“Come on, Scott. Everyone knows vets are more intelligent than doctors. Their patients don’t talk, can’t tell them what’s wrong. Besides, Xavier must trust this person as much as he trusts us. And I’m guessing he had no other option.”

Scott leaned forward. With elbows on knees, he was about to drop his head into his hands when he noticed the dried blood caked on them. Charlotte’s blood. A reminder of how fleeting life can be in Xavier’s company. He shrugged. Figured it didn’t really matter at that point and dropped his head.

“As long as Charlotte’s okay, I guess.”

Maxine cocked her head. “Oh, I didn’t know you cared.”

Scott looked up.

“Hey, I care,” Scott said. “I know I’m not like you, but Xavier has swept me up in all this just the same.” He leaned back. “Who is this guy?”

Maxine shrugged. “I caught the name Granthom. That’s all I know.”

“He seemed to know you. Called you by name when we carried Charlotte in.”

“He seemed to know all of us. Even you, Scott.”

Scott turned his head. Looked to the ceiling. “Do you hear that?”

Maxine looked around the room, hoping to find some source of noise. Other than animals breathing and a dachshund’s sneeze, there was nothing.

“Hear what?”

Scott shushed her. Held up a finger. “That. Did you hear that?”

Maxine closed her eyes. “Shit. Maybe Granthom should have a look at you while we’re here.”

Eventually the noise faded and Scott too gave up. Accepted it as trauma from the accident.

“Yes, intriguing,” Maxine continued. “I remember seeing you at the airport.”

“You were at the airport?”

“Sure. The day you met Xavier. I was there. Four Zeds were there to kill you.”

“Four?”

“Yep. So, Zero Division must think you’re pretty special to send in four of their agents to kill you. Which makes me wonder why they didn’t kill you at the facility when they had the chance.”

“For the record, they didn’t kill you either.”

“Oh, that’s simple. I had something to offer them. They would have attempted to extract my information one way or another. But you? What the hell could you tell them?”

Scott looked down. Thought back to being in that chair. The pain they put him through, the pressure he was under. He crumbled easy, told them everything he knew about Xavier. Unfortunately, it didn’t amount to much.

“Maybe they don’t think I’m as capable as Xavier thinks I am, not as important, nowhere near as dangerous.”

“Which goes back to my original comment. You intrigue me, Scott. I’ve met no one, let alone another agent, who played at both ends of the spectrum. On one hand, you are utterly useless at times. But on the other, I’ve witnessed how destructive you can be when you’re dialed into the application. You didn’t just save Charlotte when we crash-landed back there. You saved all of us.”

Scott leaned back. Wished he could remember it. Prayed he could call at will the skills that saved people’s lives.

“And then there are moments when you can’t even pull the trigger,” Maxine said. “Or stay conscious while saving our comrades’ life.”

Scott wanted to listen to her but a noise had once again stolen his attention.

“Hey!” Maxine clicked her fingers. “Are you even listening to me?”

Scott wasn’t. The sound was whispers, and then words. But they were out of order and disjointed. “Are you sure you can’t hear that?”

Maxine tried again and failed. “Maybe we need a psychologist,” she said.

He closed his eyes.

“Or a priest,” she quipped.

Then snapped them open. Stood up.

“Where are they?” he demanded. His face was red and his chest heaved.

“Who?”

“Xavier and the doctor,” he said through gritted teeth.

Maxine pointed to a doorway that led to a corridor. “In Granthom’s office. Down there. Second on the right. Name’s on the door.”

Scott marched off, Maxine in pursuit, more from a morbid curiosity than anything. Pale blue doors flashed by in his vision: a store room, front office, numbered exam rooms. He stood in front of Granthom’s office door. Voices floated around him, as clear as if they were standing right next to him, whispering into his ears. Turned the handle and swung it open.

“What do you mean I need to die?” Scott squawked.

Doctor Granthom sat at his desk in his moderately proportioned office. Xavier sat opposite, who had turned when Scott barged into the room. He looked to Scott, to Maxine, who appeared over his shoulder, and finally back to Granthom.

Granthom scrunched his beard in the desk lamp light.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think it’s time we laid everything out on the table.”

Chapter 38

“Why?” Maxine asked as she stared at Xavier. “Why is all of this coming out now?”

“Because now is the time,” he replied.

Maxine leaned forward, elbows on her knees. “Well, you’d better not leave anything out then.”

The group had reconvened in the lounges near the animal cages. Granthom had pumped Charlotte full of drugs, and there was no sign that she would even recover, let alone resume active duties. Maxine and Scott declined the repeated kind requests to shower and change out of their blood-soaked clothing, adamant that understanding came before everything else. So, they sat down opposite Xavier and Dr. Granthom and prepared themselves for whatever important piece of information the others were about to impart upon them.

“Following the atrocities of World War II,” Granthom began, “a group of socialistic elites from across the globe came together with an extremely simple premise: to make sure the world didn’t repeat events of the past. They called themselves The Circle. No beginning, no end. Efficient and strong. They poured their money, government influence, and resources into state-of-the-art biomedical engineering. Project Emporium resulted in the likes of who is in this very room right now. Zero Division Operatives and Agents have been responsible for an astronomical number of political and high-profile assassinations here and all over the world. Just search *unexplained deaths* on the internet to view the grand trail of destruction.”

Maxine sat back in the lounge. “I know all this.”

“That was for Scott,” Granthom said. “This next bit is for both of you.”

“For years I investigated The Circle members, attempting to determine their identities.”

“I didn’t think anyone knew who the members were.”

“That’s right. And they worked very hard to keep it that way. Covered money trails. Never together in a single location. They divided and conquered the workload. No head, no tail. I always had my suspicions, though. Bloodlines. Family fortunes. Entrepreneurial spirit. It was all there, I just had to put the pieces together.”

“So, what have you found out about The Circle members?”

“That they are dead,” Granthom replied, expressionless.

“What?” Maxine turned to Xavier. “Did you know about this?”

“I just found out,” he said. “That’s what we were talking about in Dr. Granthom’s office.”

“That’s not all you were talking about,” Scott interjected, his tone cascading a lethal dose of venom.

Granthom held up a hand. “We’ll get to that, Scott. I promise. But there’s more to cover first.”

“So, if The Circle members are dead, who started all this up again? Who’s giving the orders?” Maxine asked.

“That answer,” Granthom began, “is a little more complicated, Maxine. As you know, The Circle required a method to collect, decipher information. Some system that could help them make necessary decisions. They wanted to know about it before it happened. As you can imagine, that is a colossal task. So, with the best minds at their disposal, they built Veronica.”

“Veronica?” Scott asked. It seemed to strike a chord with him, but he quickly dismissed it. “Interesting name for a computer system.”

“Leaps and bounds ahead of her time,” Granthom continued, ignoring Scott’s remark. “Agents would spy on government officials, world leaders, and captains of industry. They would feed the information into Veronica, who would then instruct on a course of action.

Operatives and other Agents would carry out the orders. It was simple and self-contained.”

“What happened?” asked Scott. “Why shut it down?”

“Things got out of control,” Granthom said as he shifted in his seat. “Veronica’s primary purpose was always to protect the human race. Unfortunately, she realized wider socioeconomic issues, deep-seated problems around the globe. Which led her to a single catastrophic conclusion. And it would seem sustainability comes at a price.”

Scott looked at the others. “What’s the price?”

“Total world domination. Veronica calculated if she alone could directly control every government around the globe, she’d be able to make decisions that benefited all.”

“Genius when you think about it,” Maxine quipped. “Instant stop to wars, win/win trade deals, raising the standards on the lower class, eradicating poverty. The list goes on. Shit, maybe we should just let her do it.”

Granthom smiled. “And what if she decided to eradicate a particular class of people? Or a country, destroyed, so they could share it’s natural resources amongst other worthy contenders? How many people do you kill for the greater good to thrive? These are philosophical questions that require moral reasoning, that Veronica does not possess. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

“And that is precisely why we are here,” Xavier said. “To make sure this dark potential future doesn’t become a reality.”

“Right. So, once Veronica started espousing strategies to take over the world, The Circle pulled the plug,” Maxine added.

“That’s right,” Granthom continued. “Deleted and corrupted mass amounts of data. But they kept Veronica as she was. Call it what you will. Legacy. Sentiment. Even though she could display a form of intelligence, they still needed to feed her the information to analyze, required some level of human interaction. I suppose they

thought she would sleep. Hibernate. Until technology improved and they could take back control.”

“So, who started all this up again? Who rebooted the system?” Maxine asked. “If it was all destroyed decades ago, and The Circle members are dead, who’s pulling the strings?”

“No who,” Granthom said. “What. Veronica has somehow awakened of her own volition.”

Maxine sat forward. “How is that possible?”

Granthom shrugged. “Evolution, perhaps? Life, albeit artificial, finds a way. It would seem she activated an original unit of Zeds and began construction on others, and used them to execute a systematic extermination of The Circle members before they could act against her. And then they came for the Agents.”

“Why?” Scott asked.

“Because Agents can disrupt her plans,” Xavier said. “And she’s been more adept at locating them before I can.”

“The records are difficult to decipher,” Granthom added. “Our process is slow.”

“We were lucky to activate the ones we did,” Xavier said, looking to Maxine. “Many others weren’t as fortunate. I was too late to save them.” He looked at Scott. “Almost too late to save you.”

Gazes met then broke away.

“What are we going to do?” Scott asked.

Granthom and Xavier shared a glance. “An explosive,” Granthom said. “Small but powerful.”

“So, we go in there and blow her up. Sounds easy enough.”

Xavier rubbed his neck. “There’s a number of complexities with that strategy.”

“Well, I’m sure we can figure those out.”

“Number one,” Granthom started, “is we don’t exactly know where she is.”

“What?”

“As you can imagine, only members of The Circle knew where she is. Concealment is her primary protection. I mean, how could enemies attack something if they didn’t know where it was. And even if we knew, somehow pieced together information fragments, there’s no guarantee she’s still there. It’s been decades.”

“Well, it must be somewhere,” Scott mused.

“Number two, there are other protections to deal with. Kevlar lined walls. Security detail. A simple plastic explosive will be ineffective.”

Scott leaned on the back of the couch and stared across at the two men. “Have you got a secret weapon hidden away somewhere?”

They looked at each other. Again. A regular occurrence. “Yes, Scott,” Granthom said. “We do.”

“Well? What am I missing here?”

“You, Mr. Harris. You *are* the weapon.”

Chapter 39

Granthom cleared his throat.

“The Circle built a safety switch into their system,” he said. “A failsafe. In the event they lost control of Veronica, for whatever reason, they could destroy her.”

“Destroy?” Scott scoffed. “Not just pull a plug from the socket?”

“If only there was a plug,” Granthom fired back. “Besides, we are talking about the worst-case scenario here. This is Veronica taking full control and shutting down The Circle.”

“Which is exactly what it’s done,” Scott said.

“Precisely.”

“And what exactly is the failsafe?”

“Inside specially selected, highly trained, agents, they implanted a small explosive. Minute. Undetectable. Yet extremely powerful. From nothing to catastrophic blast in a billionth of a second.” He adjusted his glasses. “You are one of those agents, Scott.”

Everyone watched as Scott stood and started pacing around the room.

“So, that’s it?” Maxine asked. “That’s the whole reason for Scott? You found and activated him so you could use him as a human sacrifice?”

Xavier leaned forward. “I know none of this is easy to hear.”

“How is that any better than what Veronica is trying to accomplish? The death of Scott for the greater good.”

Xavier took a deep breath. “I told everyone from day one, that we are dispensable. All of us.”

“But not Scott,” she continued. “Until you need him to explode.”

“This is the mission we are on. This is the task at hand. Everything we’ve done, everything we’ve been through has led us to this point.”

“I’ve lost Jacob. Charlotte is on death’s door. I refuse to lose anyone else, Xavier. There has to be another way.”

“There is no other way,” Granthom butted in. “This is the way it is. Scott is the only device powerful enough to destroy her.”

Scott stopped marching. “Wait!” All eyes fell on the sacrificial lamb. “Why not just kill all the Zeds? Why not remove all her pieces off the board?”

“There are several factors at play. We don’t know how big her army is. We don’t know how spread they are across the field. We don’t know when she is likely to execute. As skilled as this team is, I am sure it pales compared to what is out there.”

“Time is critical,” Xavier added. “We don’t have the luxury of building a legion of agents. Veronica poses an imminent threat. And one we need to deal with immediately.”

“If we cut off the head, the operatives will cease,” Granthom continued. “They are designed to follow orders. They execute, not strategize. They are useless without her. A rudderless ship.”

Scott recommenced pacing, eager to continue bargaining for his life. “Well, what if we just made an explosive the same that’s within me?”

Granthom removed his glasses, inspected them for smudges, and replaced them on his face. “Because we don’t know what it is. And even if we did, we would struggle to get the chemicals. And with the facility now destroyed, we couldn’t obtain the equipment necessary to modify and combine them. We’ve thought about this, Scott. We’ve mulled over every possible option.”

Scott ran a shaky hand through his hair. “What if this thing you think is inside of me isn’t there? Or it’s damaged? What if you’re wrong and you send me there to die for no reason?”

“What if we’re right and we don’t?” Granthom fired back. “But just so we can be clear on this, I will show you.”

Scott backed away. “And how exactly are you going to do that?”

“Using that device in your pocket.”

Scott retrieved the item from his flight suit. He held it in his hands. It was his one connection to his alter-ego, the one responsible for saving lives and killing people. The Scott that had skills he could only dream of encapsulating. Sometimes he felt it hard to understand he *was* that person. He was the one to run into explosions and eliminate the enemy with his bare hands.

“How do you know so much about this?” Scott asked, holding the device.

“You sound like you don’t trust me, Scott,” Granthom replied. “Even after everything I just told you.”

“Forgive my paranoia.”

“Mr. Harris,” Xavier said. “Dr. Granthom is a trusted ally in our fight. You can trust him by association with me.”

Granthom placed his hand on Xavier’s shoulder. “I know so much because I worked on the program at the facility.”

“I didn’t think anyone survived once they shut the program down,” Maxine stated.

“They didn’t,” Granthom continued. “I was fortunate in that respect. I had intercepted communications and figured out what was about to happen. I witnessed the systematic destruction of my colleagues. Brilliant individuals, smartest minds the world never knew, wiped out.”

“How did you escape?” Scott asked.

“Xavier here. Amongst the death and destruction, Xavier helped me to escape the mainland via a shuttle. For all intents and purposes, I died at the facility that day. Well, my identity did. And here I am. Caring for cats with the flu and dogs that have eaten chocolate.” He held out his hands. “Does that satisfy you, Scott?”

Scott handed over the device. Felt like he was handing over part of himself.

“Don’t worry,” Granthom said as he tapped away on the screen. “You’ll get it back soon enough.”

Granthom stood and held the device over Scott’s heart. It emitted a short, shrill alarm as a series of information scrolled down the screen. He took a moment to inspect it and swiped over the pages.

“As I had hoped. Everything is still intact and fully operational. Untraceable, undetectable.” He gave the device back to Scott. “Unless you have one of those.”

Scott let the weight of the conversation sink in. The only option was for him to die in order to save the lives of millions. *How much is a life worth?*

“There’s got to be another agent out there who is like me. Someone who is more capable.”

“Like I said,” Xavier said. “We tried finding others.”

“Well, I didn’t sign up for it.”

The words cut through the room.

Granthom looked at Xavier and puffed out his cheeks. “Well, I might leave that one to you.” He turned. “Maxine, would you join me for a private conversation, please?”

Granthom waddled off, Maxine a few steps behind.

Xavier cleared his throat. “I said this before. This isn’t a straightforward conversation to have. I don’t enjoy telling someone they need to die for the fight. None of you chose this path, Mr. Harris. Yet here we are.”

Scott sat down in the lounge. “If you don’t know where she is, what’s the plan? You going to just let the Zeds capture me?”

Xavier shook his head. “If it were that simple, we would have done it by now. Whether or not she knows about your special capabilities, she would have ordered the Zeds to eliminate you on sight. No. We need to find out where she is and go to her directly.”

“How? You tell me how time critical it is yet you have no damn idea where she is!”

“That’s what we’re been trying to do, Mr. Harris! That’s why I spent so much time at the facility. Trying to figure out where she is. I gleamed as much data from my symbiote as possible and none of it gave me any idea where she is hiding. The fact is, the Zeds don’t even know!”

Silence. How were they to find something if they didn’t even know where to start?

“And we find her and then what?” Scott growled. “I get close to Veronica and my device sets off the explosives?”

Xavier cleared his throat. “No. The people who created you attached the explosive to your heart. It detonates when there is an absence of electrical activity in your heart.”

Scott blinked.

“When you flatline,” Xavier added.

“I’m sorry. What?”

“When you die,” Xavier pressed.

Scott blinked.

Xavier pursed his lips and held out his hands. “I don’t know what to tell you, Mr. Harris. I didn’t design the system. I don’t want you to die. But I also don’t want to see the mass destruction of the rest of the planet, either. You are the only thing that can stop them, the only thing powerful enough.”

Scott backed away. “I’m not sure I can do this.”

“We can use the device,” Xavier suggested. “You won’t even know what you are doing.”

“But what if it stops? What if it cuts out, and I’m left standing there with a gun against my head?” He came closer and whispered. “What if I can’t pull the trigger?”

“Mr. Harris.” Xavier opened his mouth, but nothing came out. For the first time, he didn’t know what to say. He looked around the

room. "I knew it was going to come to this. Someday. Someday, I would need to tell someone they needed to give up their life for the good of the world."

Scott turned.

"Mr. Harris," Xavier pleaded. "Please."

"I'm done talking about it," Scott said.

And walked out of the room.

Chapter 40

Scott leaned against a bench as he watched over the unconscious Charlotte. Machines beeped hypnotically. Air compressors helped her breathe, her chest rising and falling methodically. The sting of his most recent conversation still attacked his tightened chest, and he rubbed at it. He could almost feel it in there, nestled against his heart. For years and years, it was there, completely unaware he had the power to level a building in his chest cavity.

Charlotte's finger twitched. Subtle at first. Then a tremble. Then another. Heart rate increased. Beeping amplified. Head moved. A groan. Scott marched to the doors and shouted out. Xavier came running. He could hear Maxine's footfalls echo down a hallway.

Scott turned in time to see a sudden burst of energy. Charlotte's arms shot up into the air. She clumsily grasped at the breathing tube and pulled. Gurgling noises spewed forth as she attempted to wriggle away from it.

Scott froze. Mesmerized. Horrified. Xavier rushed by him and to her aid. Faint whispers filled his head as his view became grainy. Color turned monotone. He stumbled to the bench as grays turned to blacks, and whispers elongated into indecipherable ramblings.

Maxine ran into the room and immediately to Charlotte's side. From Scott's hazy perception of the world, it looked as if Xavier and Maxine were holding the patient down. They shouted at her as she fought against them, the aggression within her more alive than the human container that held it. Perhaps it was instinctive, her training reigniting itself.

Long blinks from Scott. The room changing with each new scene. At one stage Maxine and Scott had switched sides of the bed. Another time Xavier was sitting in a chair, with Maxine pacing the

room. Time seemed to slow to a stop. Then it all reversed. Picture became clearer. Sound reemerged. Normality returned. Scott stepped away from the bench and into the room.

“Nice of you to join us,” Maxine said.

Scott turned back. Maxine was leaning against the bench, arms folded.

“I...” But he didn’t have the words to describe the situation.

“It’s okay. I’m sure the shock of everything was coming down on you. But you have been very still for a long time. You want to talk about it?”

“I’m trying not to think about it.” Nothing more to say. He pointed to the bed. “How’s Charlotte doing?”

Maxine held the back of her neck as she stretched it. “Yeah. Just resting. It was quite a traumatic wake-up.”

“Yeah, I saw it. What was she trying to do?”

“What outstanding soldiers do. She wanted to get on her feet, load up with weapons, and kill some Zeds.”

Scott pursed his lips. “Does she know?”

“About what?”

“You know. About everything we spoke about out there.”

Maxine shook her head. “Not yet. We’ll wait till she’s semi-recovered before we lay all of that on her.”

Scott nodded and looked up to the small windows near the ceiling that dotted the wall. “How long till sunrise?”

She looked at him deadpan. “Why? You got somewhere to be?”

Scott sighed. “No, I guess not.”

He looked at her and wondered if Xavier assigned her to guard duty, to monitor the important asset until we need him to die. A week ago, he was oblivious to it all—sleeper agents, Zeds programmed to destroy them, an evil computer’s plans to take over the entire world. He went from stationery salesperson to murderer to

sleeper agent to walking bomb in the space of seven days. He felt like he was constantly playing catchup.

Scott bowed his head and walked over to the bed. Charlotte lay still with her eyes shut. Looked to be in a state of peace, which is an emotion he had never seen from her. When she was awake, she was well and living up to her agent designation. A walking weapon of mass destruction. No better than a fanatic wearing a suicide vest.

He placed a hand on her shoulder, for no other reason than it felt like the right thing to do. Like, if he was lying there on the table half dead, that's what he would want Maxine to do for him.

She stirred softly, then slowly opened her eyes.

"You," she mumbled.

"Me what?"

She lazily lifted a hand to his cheek. "You saved me."

Scott held her hand against his cheek until she didn't have the strength to hold it there any longer. He placed it down next to her.

"Thought we lost you there for a minute," Scott whispered.

"To be honest, I think you did."

Scott took a breath. "What was it like? To die, I mean."

Charlotte managed a smile. "I'll tell you about it sometime."

"Like, did it hurt?" Scott pushed.

"It was hurting at the time if that helps."

Maxine placed a hand on Scott's shoulder. "Maybe give Charlotte some time to recover before your interrogation," she said. "We need her back on her feet as soon as possible."

"I tried getting up before," Charlotte breathed.

"I know," Maxine replied. "I meant when you've recovered more than just ten percent."

Charlotte managed a weak smile and closed her eyes.

Maxine spun Scott around.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Scott looked around the room, before falling on Maxine's hard stare. "What?"

"What's it like to *die*? Are you serious?"

"Hey, you're not the one who has to die, okay? I think I would like some perspective on the subject."

She stepped forward. "Listen. Charlotte and me... have almost died more times than I can remember. And don't forget Jacob threw himself off a building to save us all. Don't forget about the sacrifices we have made for this mission. You are part of this. You have a role to play."

Scott opened his mouth to reply, but couldn't find the words. Death was all around him. He had been caught up in it, picked up in the hurricane against his will.

"And why did Jacob throw himself off a building?" Scott asked.

Maxine looked away. "Xander had implanted him. I'd seen them before on some Zeds, but not all of them."

"What's the implant do?"

"A small explosive. Volatile. Jacob mustn't have known." She took a breath. "If Jacob was on the helicopter when it detonated, we'd all be ashes right now."

Suddenly, Charlotte gasped. Eyes snapped open. Chest lurched off the bed. Eyes rolled back in her head. Her vitals spiked. Alarms sounded as her chest lifted off the bed again and again. She groaned out with a guttural roar that tore around the walls and attacked Scott's skin.

Granthom thudded into the room, the swinging doors banging against the wall as if to alert everyone to his presence.

"Everyone, step back," he ordered.

He pulled out a penlight and pulled back Charlotte's eyelids. More commands came forth quickly and direct. Medicines, machines. Xavier and Maxine scurried around the room collecting the items.

But Scott didn't see or hear them. He let the swinging doors ease shut behind him as he shuffled out of the room, muffling the commotion of voices coalescing with Charlotte's agonizing cries. It was too much to bear, too much to think about. The only thing he knew is he needed to get as far away from there as fast as he could.

Chapter 41

Scott had torn off his dirty black flight suit, the one the Zeds gave him at the facility and coated with Charlotte's blood, and put on the clothes Granthom had offered him hours before. He had rejected the offer at first, with knowledge taking precedence over hygiene. Questions needed answers; the puzzle needed pieces. But things had changed.

Xavier and Granthom had shared disturbing details of the impending doom to the entire planet, and the weight of his responsibility was becoming heavier by the second, driving fatigue through him. Mentally. Emotionally. Physically. He was adamant he would not finish the marathon he was on, let alone sprint to the finish line—*Identity* application or not.

The Hawaiian shirt and cargo pants weren't comfortable, but required to take his mind off his death sentence. Charlotte's blood was a constant reminder of his mortality. He needed to separate himself from Charlotte's painful roars that continued to echo in his ears.

He threw open the Jeep door and eased into the driver's seat. No one had touched the Jeep since they arrived, and it was still parked alongside Granthom's green door. Metallic smells wafted around him. It seemed to Scott that whatever he did, Charlotte's blood would follow him everywhere.

He would drive, that's the only thing he knew. Foot down on the accelerator all the way to the floor. Windows down to flush the putrid aroma. He would drive as far as he could until the gas ran out, or the engine overheated, or he got a flat tire. It didn't matter. Then he would walk; find a new identity. Start over. Forget about Xavier, Maxine... Charlotte, Jacob... Zero Division, *Identity*. That first meeting with Xavier in the airport bathroom would become a long-for-

gotten memory, perhaps like the dream he could never quite remember when he woke up from a deep sleep.

However, he didn't know how he was going to accomplish any of those things. But that wasn't important to him at that moment. He just needed to get away. Shrug the responsibility off his shoulders, relinquish his fate to others who had the fortitude to see it through to the end. Volunteering to die wasn't who he was.

Turned the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered to life; the rhythmic thrums cascaded through him. Could almost rock him to sleep. *Sleep forever.* Flicked on the headlights. Gasp. Focused on the person standing in front of the grill, hidden in the darkness, now ablaze in the vehicle's spotlights.

Maxine stood in the headlight burn, arms on her hips, clearly unimpressed with what she was observing. Scott was sure if she had a gun with her, she would have fired it through the glass into his shoulder. She kept her gaze through the windshield as she rounded the front of the Jeep and approached the driver's side.

She threw open the door. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Scott gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles. Considered just piling on the gas and tearing away from there as fast as he could. Revved the engine.

"I can't do it," he said.

She leaned in the door. "Turn that fucking engine off and get your fucking ass inside."

"Seeing Charlotte in pain like that. I... I can't just resign myself to death. I just can't. I can't do it."

"Jacob gave his life for us. Charlotte is trying to roll off her death bed to pick up a gun. And you want to run?"

"I didn't ask for this. I never wanted to be... like this."

"None of us *asked* for this. We didn't choose to be like this."

“Didn’t we? Do any of us actually know? Do you remember being trained at the facility?”

No response.

“No,” Scott said. “I didn’t think so.”

He revved the engine again.

“Doesn’t the responsibility of saving the world mean anything to you?”

Another rev. The chassis shuddered. Wanted to pounce.

“Maybe for the person I am when I’m plugged into *Identity*. But not for me. Not like this. I’m not like you.”

Maxine reached in and turned the engine off. Grabbed Scott by his arm and dragged him out onto the bitumen. Pinned him up against the car.

“Now, listen here, agent. We’re going to go back inside. We’ll figure out a plan that doesn’t involve you blowing up. We’ll get Charlotte. Then we’ll go kill Veronica. Okay?”

Scott stared off into the distance. *Veronica*.

“Scott?” She clicked her fingers. “You hear me?”

He did, but a memory stole his focus. A very specific event from his past. *Coincidence? Was it even real?* He mumbled something.

“What?” Maxine asked.

“I know who Veronica is.”

“What do you mean? We all know what Veronica is.”

Scott dropped his head and broke away from Maxine. “No.” He gripped his head. “That’s not what I mean. Not what, it’s who. I’ve spoken to her.”

Maxine shook her head. “What do you mean, *you’ve spoken to her?* How is that possible?”

“I... I don’t know. I still don’t understand any of this.” He shook his head. “It’s like some kind of connection. It’s difficult to explain.”

As he said this, his view grew in brilliance until he had to shield his eyes. Maxine’s words turned to jelly, lost in a sea of white noise.

Then above it all, whispers. Multiple people, various voices. Pitch. Tone. Pace. Louder and louder, until Scott placed his hands over his ears. Yet they continued to barrage him. He screamed to drown them out.

Then as suddenly as the episode hit him, it was over. The world was normal, bathed in the peaceful pre-dawn sky. Silence except for crickets.

“Jesus Christ, Scott.”

Scott looked up at her. Fear etched in his features. “They’re coming,” he breathed.

“Who’s coming?”

He grabbed her by the shoulders. “*They’re* coming. Zero Division. I can hear them.” Balled his hands into fists. “They’re coming!”

Scott left Maxine and ran back inside the veterinary clinic. Down the hallway, through the double doors, with Maxine in close pursuit. Inside the room, Granthom stood over Charlotte, with Xavier observing from a corner chair.

“We’ve got to go!” Scott announced.

Xavier stood. “Why?”

“They’re coming. Zero Division. I heard them.”

“How did you hear them?”

Scott pointed to his head. “In here. I can hear them. They’re coming. Come on. Pack this up, let’s go!”

Xavier looked to Granthom who shared equal concern.

“How much time do we have?” Granthom asked.

Scott shrugged. “Minutes? Hours? Days? How the fuck should I know? We should just pack up and get the hell out of here!”

“I’m afraid Charlotte can’t travel anywhere,” Granthom said. “She’s far too unstable.”

“If they find her, they’ll kill her,” Xavier said. “We all know that.”

“Then we make our stand here,” Maxine said.

“No!” Granthom said. “If Zero Division are coming, then you need to get Scott out of here. You know how important this is. We can’t forsake a battle to lose the war.”

“I’m not leaving Charlotte,” Maxine said. “Not leaving anyone else behind. Not losing anyone else.”

Eyes darted around the room like a Mexican standoff.

“I’ll stay,” Charlotte croaked from the bed.

Maxine walked over. “No. It’s all or nothing. That’s an order.”

Charlotte held up her hand and Maxine caught it.

“I remember when I first met you,” Charlotte said. “Thought you were such a bitch.” She chuckled then coughed. “Leave me. It’s for the best. I’ll do what I can to hold them off.”

“I can’t,” Maxine said. Her usually authoritative voice now barely a whisper, usually so sure, now full of doubt.

Charlotte squeezed with every ounce of energy she had. “Go!” she mouthed.

Maxine closed her eyes, wanted the moment to last forever. But inevitably knew it couldn’t. The army Xavier had brought together was dwindling by the hours. She wondered how many of them would be alive by the time they needed to kill Veronica. Would it be enough?

Granthom stood at the veterinary rear door as Xavier loaded the last bag into the back of the Jeep. He stared at the sunrise filling the sky with the hope of a new day. They had hastily said their goodbyes to Charlotte while the doctor moved the animals to the far end of the clinic. He hoped whoever would find them would treat them well.

“Last chance to join us,” Xavier said.

“My job is to stay with the patient. Your job is to make sure Scott does his.”

Xavier nodded. The pair shook hands. "Thank you, Granthom. For everything."

"Thank you, Xavier. You gave me purpose well beyond my years. Make sure you complete the mission. At all costs."

"At all costs," Xavier repeated.

"You know everything I do. You have my research. There is nothing more I can do for you."

"There is one thing," Xavier said. "Stay with her. Until the very end."

Granthom nodded. "Now get the hell out of here."

Xavier climbed into the driver's seat and pressed down on the accelerator, the jeep powering down past the building and around a corner.

Granthom watched until they were out of sight, before closing and locking the door. He waddled up the hallway, his shoes squeaking on the linoleum. Eased through the double doors, letting them silently shut behind him. Approached the bed and looked down at the patient.

"You ready for this?" he said.

She nodded. And she wouldn't have to wait for long.

Within a few minutes, the sound of screeching tires seeped through the walls. Orders. Shouts. Heavy footfalls. The roar of more engines, followed by methodical thumping that raced past overhead. Then several dull thuds, one after the other echoed down the empty corridors of the clinic and into the room.

"They're coming, Charlotte. It won't be long now."

She grimaced. Nodded. "I'm ready. Are you, doctor?"

"I've lived a long life. It's time for me."

"It's time for both of us," she retorted.

An explosion thundered beyond the double doors as smoke sifted under the double doors. Fast-moving feet, barely audible as they expertly negotiated the premises.

Double doors swung open.

Charlotte lifted her gun and fired at the assailants. A deafening roar as bullets sprayed in both directions. Blood sprayed. Bodies fell. And then Charlotte's gun clicked dry.

And the end loomed over them both.

Chapter 42

The Jeep sped along the single-lane dirt path. Green fields stretched out in both directions until they reached thick foliage on their left or the mountain range on their right. If it wasn't for the fact that the end was just around the corner, Xavier would have classified it as a beautiful day. He had little clue where he was going, other than as far away as possible. When he could get back onto the main road, he would judge his bearings and make a call.

A rumble sauntered overhead and Xavier checked the rear vision mirror. A black plume of smoke billowed towards the sky. Maxine stopped loading the assault rifle. Scott stared out the rear window. They knew what it was, knew what had happened. Yet they didn't stop, knowing what was coming for them, and determined to finish what they started.

Xavier glanced up at the rear vision mirror. Flanking the explosion were two dark shapes, dropping into his line of vision.

"We've got some problems," he announced. "I hope you two are ready for this."

He yanked on the steering wheel, sending the four-wheel-drive off the dirt path and tearing through a field, headed to the wooded section. Cover was a necessity, but it was not a savior.

Scott viewed the helicopters out the window and pushed the buds into his ears once more. Waited as they worked their way inside of him and connected with his body. Then he pulled out his device, found the application, and pressed down on *Identity*.

The black four-wheel-drive jostled over the uneven terrain with little regard for the passengers. Driving cross country using the night sky

as navigation was an arduous task at the best of times, and Woodward apologized for every unruly shove the unforgiving topography threw at them. He glanced into the rear vision mirror as he made a beeline for the cover of the forest with an unrelenting dark vehicle in pursuit.

“They’re gaining on us, sir,” Woodward announced.

There was no shock or surprise. The attack in the medical laboratory to save Krantz was blunt and fierce, and they knew it was a matter of time before backup arrived and tracked them down. Dimitrijevic’s crew, although assumed directionless given the death of Miroslav, still proved themselves as insistent and merciless.

“How’s Krantz doing?” Scott yelled as he pulled back the cocking lever on his H&K assault rifle.

Maxine, crouched in the vehicle’s cargo hold, looked down at the Deputy Director. “Stable,” she stated. Pulled her hand away from her shoulder bullet wound and inspected the blood. “I’m fine, by the way. You know... where you shot me.”

Scott clicked off the safety and pressed the button to slide down the side window. “I knew you would be,” he said. “For the record, you asked me to. Anyway, I’ll buy you a beer when this is all over.”

She looked over to him between sweat laden hair strands. “I’m gonna need something stronger than beer.”

“Maxine, we get out of this, I’ll give you anything you want.”

He leaned out the window and aimed his weapon towards the trailing vehicle.

“Keep her steady, Woodward.”

Woodward did his best, slightly easing off on the accelerator and gently navigated over the unforeseen bumps.

Wedge between the glovebox and the door frame, Scott fired targeting ordinance on the shadowing vehicle. Bullets sparked off the chassis, that showed no signs of changing course. The dog had caught its scent, and it wouldn’t give up until it achieved its goal. Scott shift-

ed aim and fired a volley into the windshield. Snowflakes blossomed on the bulletproof glass, yet once again, didn't slow their pursuer.

Scott ducked back inside. "I need something flammable."

Maxine rummaged around in the back. "What about this?" She held up a small propane bottle in one hand and some flares in the other.

"Perfect," Scott replied. "Strap some flares to that for me and wait for my signal."

Scott steadied himself out the window again, as Maxine dove into the rear seats and lowered her window on the driver's side.

"On the count of three," Scott declared.

When he hit the magic number, Maxine lit the flares and tossed the makeshift device into the air. Scott stalked it through the rifle sights, watched as it turned end over end, the flares dancing in the early morning abyss. Just as it contacted the windscreen, he fired a persistent barrage into the makeshift explosive. The result was immediate, engulfing the entire vehicle in a fireball. Scott continued firing, striking the windshield, headlights, and tires.

Eventually, the vehicle slowed, and a burning body fell from the driver's position. It crawled away from the burning chassis, still eager to pursue them. Scott aimed and fired. Body crumpled. Instant death. Continued to cook in the flames.

Just then, an attack chopper roared overhead. Woodward kept a close eye on the dark beast as it galloped across the sky. The pilot fired a swathe of bullets, large ammunition that kicked up the surrounding ground.

"Almost there, sir," Woodward urged.

"Don't stop, Woodward," Scott ordered. "Whatever you do, don't stop. We're dead out here in the open."

"Shit! Our evac better be ready," Maxine said.

"I radioed as soon as we left the compound," Woodward replied. "Maria is ready to stabilize Krantz."

Another cascade of deadly fire bombarded around them before the attacker banked around. Woodward jerked the vehicle away from impending doom, kicking up clouds of dirt with its maneuver. Clenched his teeth. If they could just make the tree line, they would have sufficient cover from the terrors overhead.

“Bogey on our six!” Woodward called.

Scott and Maxine both turned to look behind them. The helicopter descended deftly onto their trail.

“Everybody? Get down,” Scott warned.

The helicopter’s front canon lit up the void with explosive power pummeling the four-wheel drive. Woodward blindly weaved left and right as he crouched as far down as he could in the drivers’ seat. Maxine dived on Krantz to protect him from glass and other shrapnel. Scott looked at his weapon and knew how ineffective it would be against the beast.

The car darted between some trees and into the depths of the woodland until they slammed into a three-hundred-year-old trunk.

Chapter 43

Steam rose from under the crumpled hood of the four-wheel drive. Several large cracks marked the windscreen. Bullet holes covered most of the panels.

“Is everyone still with me?” Scott coughed.

“Here, sir,” Woodward grumbled, jammed between the steering wheel and the seat.

“Me too,” Maxine added, gently brushing glass and other debris off her and Krantz.

Scott checked his watch. “Come on,” he said. “We haven’t got much time. It won’t take long for those bastards to find the clearing and our ride out of here.”

They ejected themselves out of the smashed-up vehicle. Stayed low as the helicopter glided over the ground at the tree line like an attack dog patrolling the fence to its domain.

It was slow and awkward going as Scott and Maxine carried Krantz, with Woodward close behind carrying the equipment connected to Krantz. They weaved between trees, the undergrowth thick and unwieldy. Scott knew time was running out, not just for the man they carried, but for all of them.

Now and then, a methodical grumble would form overhead, and then depart just as quick. Still, they continued to push on. The mission was the mission. Failure was not an option. It never was, never would be.

Through a thicket of trees and bushes, Scott spied their transport. It seemed to crouch on the ground, waiting for orders, almost invisible with the surroundings. Scott took a moment to investigate the surroundings. Silence gripped them. The helicopter looked deserted.

“Woodward?” Scott asked. “Be a good man and dial in the emergency evac procedures, would you?”

With the help of Maxine, Woodward gently placed the equipment on the ground and pulled out his radio. Tuned it to their evacuation channel.

“Zulu echo delta niner three. Are you reading me? Over.”

A brief delay of white noise, before the reply.

“Reading you indigo delta. Over.”

Woodward looked up at Scott who nodded in reply.

“Prepare for emergency evac. Over.”

“Copy that. Out.”

A whine flowed from the helicopter as the blades slowly began turning. The cargo bay door slid open and two armed soldiers hit the ground, searching the area. With them, a smaller figure shone a light.

“Let’s go,” Scott exclaimed.

The trio quickly moved towards their intended target, under the guard of the soldiers.

“Glad you lot could stick around,” Scott said as he handed over Krantz to the combat medics aboard the aircraft.

Maria shrugged. “I didn’t have anywhere else to be.”

“Well, we need to get out of here before—.”

Multiple silent shots cut his sentence short. All four soldiers—the guards on the ground and the combat medics—dropped in their spots from identical headshots. A splash of red flashed across Maria’s face. Scott grabbed her with one hand as he fired into the scrub on both sides of him.

The pilot, with Krantz on board, increased power and lifted the helicopter off the ground. Another thunderous roar as a black helicopter sprinted across the glade and banked around. It opened fire with its canon, tracer bullets lighting up the clearing.

But it was the twin missiles that shot out from the tree line that were the biggest threat. Dual dark gray trails led from a similar loca-

tion to different targets. One missile crashed into the attacking aircraft. The other slammed into the back of the evac helicopter. Matching ferocious explosions tore up the sky.

“No!”

Scott watched in horror as twin fiery wrecks crashed to the ground, setting off additional explosions.

Not only was their escape eliminated, but Krantz was dead. The attack just incinerated their entire reason for the mission.

The mission was a failure.

Scott ducked as he navigated to the others who had taken refuge behind an array of fallen trees.

“Maxine, what have we got?” Scott asked.

“At least four snipers on our side of the tree line.”

“To set themselves up, they must have known well in advance,” Woodward said. “We’ve got a mole, sir.”

Scott pulled a handgun out and pointed at Maria’s head.

“Talk,” he said.

“Shoot me if you like,” she said, “if you have no further use for me now that Krantz is dead. But I did not turn on you. I did not tell anyone.”

“Scott,” Maxine said. “We’ve got to move.”

Scott stared into Maria’s eyes. “If I find out you had anything to do with this, I’ll make sure you die slow.”

“Sir,” Woodward said. “We need to go.”

“Maxine, find us a route out of here.”

“Back to the car, then follow the tree line to the north.”

“There’s a river, sir,” Woodward added. “It leads to the border.”

“We’ll figure it out from there. On my mark, Maxine takes point. Woodward, you stay with Maria. I’ll bring up the rear. If anything happens to me, keep going. Understood?”

They looked at each other. They had been in some dark times before, impenetrable circumstances, staring at certain death. That mo-

ment seemed infinitely worse. Surrounded by snipers. Unknown assailants. No evac was coming to save them. Krantz dead. Mission obliterated.

Scott nodded at Maxine. With the gun up, she cautiously scanned the area before quickly maneuvering to a nearby tree. The large above-ground root system provided cover from numerous angles. She waved the others over. One by one they made the trek over open ground. Using the tree as cover he scanned the ground and branches for the insurgents, first left, then right. Nothing.

They needed to move. He knew the best thing was to increase the distance between them and the shooters, but that was a difficult task when you didn't know where they were hiding. Scott and Maxine took turns leading the group to new concealment while the other watched their backs. Shadows lay heavy in the thick foliage, despite a clear early morning sky above them.

The group found their way to a line of trees. Beyond that, a small clearing of scattered saplings that wouldn't provide any cover. A short distance to their wrecked car. Their journey had been uneventful. They hadn't been engaged in any firefight. No signs of the enemy.

"Do you think we're clear, sir?" Woodward asked. Sweat ran down his face and stained his shirt.

"I don't know," Scott said. "Maxine, what do you think?"

Maxine, keeping an ever vigil eye on their surroundings, said, "I don't know. I think they're playing with us. They aren't amateurs. I think they're just waiting for us to get in the open."

"How's the shoulder holding up," Scott asked, referring to where he shot her earlier at the compound.

"Adrenalin is an amazing thing," she said. "I'll be just fine."

Scott nodded. "Where to from here?"

“Dogleg right,” she said. “There’s some more cover up ahead, then we must keep moving at pace. Try to put some distance between us and them. If I had my gear, I’d hunt them down one by one.”

“Well,” said Scott. “Here we are. Keep low, keep moving to the river. I’ll take point on this section.”

Scott stepped out from cover and immediately fell. He clutched at his leg.

“Cover,” he screamed. It was impossible to tell where the shot came from.

Maxine immediately scanned the area as a large caliber bullet bit into her other shoulder. Rounds to Woodward’s limbs caused him to spin and fall. A coordinated attack, expertly executed.

Six gunmen materialized from the trees, previously invisible in the wilderness. Three of them wore ghillie suits, the others sporting camouflaged combat uniforms. They proudly displayed identical patches on their shoulders; a winged cobra twisted around a sword.

They encircled the group, their machine guns trained on the injured spies. Maria looked down at the people fallen around her, and then finally to the seventh person who emerged from between the trees.

Maria knew who it was immediately. Before the soldier removed the balaclava. Before they even said a word.

Maria ran up to her. “Yana!”

The soldier swung her hand and caught Maria in the face. Maria stopped short, held her red cheek. The soldier ripped off her face covering.

“Father is disappointed in you, little sister. He sent me to bring you home.”

“I told him I never wanted to see him again.”

Yana scoffed. “You can tell him yourself in a few days.”

“I refuse to go.”

Yana grabbed her by the arm. “We’ve been tracking you for days. We were about to invade the building where you were being held hostage, before it collapsed. We piloted drones to push you into a corner.” Held her close. “So, you will do as I say.”

“Commander,” one soldier called. “What should we do with these people?”

Yana walked over to the injured group. She removed her weapon and waved it over them.

“I don’t need three of you to tell me the same thing,” she said. “Who shall I sacrifice.”

Woodward glanced to Scott.

“I’ll never say a word,” Woodward proclaimed. “You’d be wasting your time.”

“Woodward!” Scott shouted. “No!”

Yana pointed the gun at Woodward’s face.

“No!” Scott shouted again.

“I can’t hear you!” Yana said.

“Speak up,” Xander ordered. His voice echoed through the trees.

Scott winced as he clutched at his leg, blood leaking out at a rapid rate. He looked around at his fallen comrades. Maxine sported dual bullet wounds, Xavier in no better shape. Zeds surrounded them with aimed weapons. Wind blew, causing shafts of light to dance over the ground. This was the end game, there was no coming back from this. Everything they had tried to accomplish, had led to this: capture and execution.

“Why is Veronica so eager to get her hands on you? I will not ask you again.”

Something in his tone made Scott think. He looked over to Xavier, who stared back intently. Xander didn’t know. Didn’t know about the explosive inside of him. Veronica had kept that from Xan-

der. But it also spurred a secondary thought. Why was Xander questioning his orders? He could almost sense a rift in their ranks.

“Perhaps I should just kill you now,” Xander said. “Put an end to this ludicrous game.” He aimed his sidearm.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Scott said. His voice quivered in the morning air.

“And just why not?” he sneered.

Scott was still uncertain how much information he should divulge. Once it was out there, they wouldn’t hold any more cards.

Xander fired. A load of undergrowth exploded beside his head.

“I’m losing my patience,” Xander said.

“Because you, me, and everyone within a few hundred feet will incinerate before they could blink an eye. See all these trees around us? I could flatten this entire area.”

The confidence that exuded his lips surprised even him.

Xander stared at him, mulling over the statement. “Is that a fact?”

“Try it and find out,” Scott said. “That’s why Veronica wants me. She knows I’ve got the power to wipe her off the face of the earth.”

Xander held his weapon between Scott’s eyes. Moved in closer.

“If she sent you to take me to her, she wants me alive and safe. If she sent you here to kill me, she intended for you and your men to die alongside me.”

The gun wavered. “Or maybe I don’t listen to her anymore,” Xander said.

Scott chewed this over. It was something he hadn’t considered to that point.

“Sounds like we may have a common enemy,” Scott said.

Xander continued to point the weapon for a long time, deliberating the situation. Eventually, he lowered the weapon.

“Very well,” he said. “I think perhaps we should have a little chat.”

Xander turned to his men. “Get them up.”

Rough hands got them all to their feet. Xander himself yanked out Scott's earbuds and confiscated his device, while Zeds checked the others for weapons. A Zed pressed a gun against Xavier's head as they marched Scott and Maxine through the wooded area toward three black vehicles that had come to a skidding halt at odd angles across the tree line.

A loud voice boomed behind them, and Maxine and Scott turned.

"Where is she?" Xander yelled into Xavier's face.

"I... I don't know."

It was a tone he had never heard flow from Xavier's lips. Something that sent a cold shiver wash over his entire body. Reminded him of a helpless lamb before the slaughter.

Xander nodded.

Xavier's eyes widened.

The gunshot was sudden. A massive mushroom opened up on Xavier's forehead. His eyes rolled back in his head. Fell to his knees. Then fell forward into the dirt and leaves.

"No!" Maxine roared.

Scott couldn't breathe. Ringing in his ears distorted Maxine's scream. Despite her injuries, she fought against the hands on her body and the weapons thrust up against her. She spun and launched a front kick into the nearest Zed, releasing an abomination of rage that just about broke the Zed's spine.

Xander marched towards her as she picked up a loose weapon. Spun it around. Xander caught the barrel and held it. Maxine fired, knocking a Zed off its feet. Xander punched forward, colliding his fist with her nose. Her head rocked back and she tilted, blood gushing from her nose.

Zed's immediately surrounded her; weapons ready to open fire.

"Wait!" Scott yelled. "I need her. If you want my help, Maxine lives."

Xander stared at Maxine. Eventually he relented and waved his men away.

“Get her in a vehicle,” he ordered. “And for god’s sake, restrain her this time.”

He looked at Scott. “So hard to get good help these days.”

Xander marched off shouting more instructions to his unit.

As a Zed pushed him forward, Scott stumbled forward. He didn’t know which side he was fighting for anymore. Good. Bad. Right. Wrong. Common allies. Common enemies. Common purpose. Which side of the line he was on depended on perspective. The result was going to be the same, always was. All he did was extend his own destruction.

For how long, he didn’t know.

All he knew is that as long as he had the power to destroy Veronica, they needed him alive.

FINALITY

“The only way to give finality to the world is to give it consciousness.”

Miguel De Unamuno

“For to desire is better than to possess, the finality of the end was dreaded as deeply as it was desired.”

D. H. Lawrence

Chapter 44

Three days earlier

Xander peered through the plexiglass at the restrained Scott. He hoped the prisoner would be easier to crack than Maxine, who held together frighteningly well under their interrogation tactics. When they captured the two agents, he couldn't wait to inform Veronica of their spoils.

"Call it in and let her know," Xander sneered.

"Are you sure that's wise, sir?" Xabi countered. "Veronica ordered us to stay away from this facility."

The facility. He had almost forgotten how much he hated it. Something, or someone, had pushed the facility into the far recesses of his mind. All it took was a spark, a fleeting connection, that made it visible to him. And every moment he spent there, the stronger the memories became, the clearer the picture in his mind. Pain had settled in his consciousness.

Xander swung his hand around with lightning speed and connected the back of his hand with Xabi's face.

"Don't question my authority, Xabi. We're telling her so she knows she's wrong." Xander straightened his uniform, then helped Xabi right himself. Held him close. "Even Veronica is fallible. She should know this is the case. Do you understand?"

Xabi nodded slowly.

Xander slapped him on the back. "Great! Let's get to it then."

With that, Xander left the room to begin Scott's interrogation.

Xabi stared at his phone for a long time, dabbing at the trail of blood that ran from his lips. It wasn't the first time it happened, and

not the first time it happened to him. That's the way Xander was, the methods he utilized. The one thing he hated more than communicating with Veronica was dealing with Xander. He reached up and ran a hand over the device on the back of his neck. It was like a deadly shock collar to keep him at bay. He derided himself questioning the orders so bluntly in front of Xander. It was a stupid thing to do, sometimes fatal.

Still, his task was to pass orders through the hierarchy, only because he was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Eventually, he picked up the phone and dialed the number. He hoped the call wouldn't connect. Wished for an endless stream of dial tones. It wasn't to be, with the call being answered immediately.

"We've captured two agents at the facility."

"Xander was specifically ordered not to go to the facility."

The female voice was firm and uncompromising.

"I understand." He cringed when he said this because he didn't understand at all.

"Who are they?"

"Maxine Morgan and Scott Harris."

"Where are they now?"

"Maxine is being held in a room following her interrogation."

"Have you obtained any information about Xavier's location?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Where is Scott?"

"He recently commenced his interrogation."

"What level of interrogation is being applied?"

Xabi looked through the plexiglass into the next room. Noted the use of waterboarding. Knew of the car battery and garden shears on standby.

"Level three."

"I instructed Xander to limit interrogation tactics to level two."

Xabi didn't know how to answer. He was between the proverbial rock and hard place. The middle man. The messenger. Everyone knows what happens to the messenger. He flattened down his neatly parted brown hair and cleared his throat.

"How would you like us to proceed?"

"Calculating. Please hold."

A brief interlude.

"Release Scott on the mainland. Another unit will pick him up."

Xabi entered this on his tablet. Identified potential handover locations; circled sections of city maps and listed coordinates.

"Call through with the arrival details."

The line went dead. Xabi took a deep breath and let the moment of calm wash over him. He removed the blood from his face, picked up the tablet, and walked into the next room.

"Where's Maxine?" Scott asked. "Is she okay?"

"She's... fine. Just fine."

Xabi ignored the prisoner in the chair and handed over the tablet. Xavier took it and looked through the information provided. Xabi sensed the shift, the disdain seeping from his comrade's pores. Xander handed the device back. Both Veronica's orders and Xander's reaction to them worried Xabi.

They simultaneously looked at Scott, observed the confusion across his features.

The twin's eyes met once more.

"Are you sure there is no other way?" Xander hushed.

"I'm afraid not," Xabi replied.

Deep breath. "How certain are we about this?"

Xabi clenched his jaw, then spoke in hushed tones. "They are the instructions. Veronica is concerned we have disobeyed her direct orders by coming here. How do you want to proceed?"

They looked at each other, as if in silent conversation. Eventually, Xander waved him away. Xabi left the room and Xander continued the interrogation.

Xander returned after escorting Scott to a holding room.

“What are your orders, sir?” Xabi asked.

The commanding officer folded his arms. “We’re going to follow Veronica’s orders, of course.”

The comment threw Xabi off his mental tracks, to the point where he didn’t know how to respond.

“With a minor change,” Xander added.

“Small, sir?”

“Minute!” Xander smiled. “Xavier isn’t coming back for these two. They are nothing more than fodder. So, we will go to him.”

“How are we going to accomplish that?”

“Simple. We are going to help them escape.”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

“Find Xavier’s symbiote. We’ve got a very special mission for him.”

Xabi nodded. “Do you think Maxine will believe it? What about Scott?”

Xavier laughed. “Did you see the look on his face throughout the interrogation? Heard the way he crumbled? Besides, the bullshit about reading minds and tracking his device is enough to keep him paranoid.”

“Veronica will not be happy about this.”

“Veronica has lost sight of what we’re trying to do here. At the end of this mission, we’ll have everything we need to win this damn war. And there’ll be nothing they can do about it.”

Chapter 45

A day earlier

Xander sat in his SUV a block from the buildings, equidistant from the two drop points. The alley was dark and secluded, yet provided views of both buildings. Far enough to remain hidden, close enough to remain connected to his symbiote.

His symbiote was picking up Xavier, and with him, the information they needed to win the war. They were closer now than ever, and nothing was going to stand in the way of their success. Not Xavier. Not Veronica.

He pressed a phone against his ear.

“Do not engage,” Veronica commanded. It wasn’t the first time she had ordered the disengagement from the agents that threatened their mission. *“Confirm.”*

“I’m sorry, Veronica. It’s a little late for that.”

“Retreat immediately. The targets must not be executed.”

“Why not? What’s changed from the original orders, the initial mission?”

“Please hold.”

Brief intermission.

“That information is classified. I order you to disengage and retreat to fallback positions. You must not harm the target.”

Xander looked down at the Grom; a shoulder-mounted surface-to-air missile system that he very much intended to use on the targets if something went wrong with the plan they had devised.

An explosion ripped through the sky. It was the device they planted into Jacob, the information flowing through to him from his

symbiote. The look on Maxine's face was electric. Not much of that mattered anymore. Killing Jacob was just a little *fuck you*. The real joy would be when his symbiote detonated the hidden explosives. That would be catastrophic. It wouldn't be long now.

"This is going to end. Tonight."

Xander clicked off. It was apparent Veronica had somehow lost sight of the bigger picture. There was a world that needed saving, and she was standing in the way of it.

They loaded Xavier into the helicopter. But something was wrong. Confusion. Xander looked up to see the Zero Division helicopter erupt into a fireball, wreckage falling onto the streets below. He eased out of the driver's seat while keeping a view of the building. He could sense the pain, almost feel the heat. As the smoke and debris cleared, could see his symbiote dangling from the edge of the building. It was an unpredicted catastrophic failure, but it wasn't over. Not yet. Not when he and his symbiote still held the trigger in their pockets.

The other helicopter bounced from one rooftop to theirs, landing out of sight for Xander. But then she came into view. Maxine. Strong-willed. Determined. Dangerous. They should have killed her when they had the chance.

Sensed his symbiote was ready. Watched him reached into his pocket.

No, they can't win.

The end was close.

Just press the button.

The explosion seemed to suck the air out of the night, then detonate every particle. The sonic boom shattered the glass of every building within a four-block radius. Glass rained down onto the pavement, shards hitting the ground like lethal snowflakes. People ran once more. Sudden and destructive. There would be no surviving it.

But something was wrong. The money. They hadn't picked up the money.

Always one step ahead.

Then his symbiote was falling. Knew it before he saw it happen. Like in slow motion. Then a gunshot. And then nothing. The connection to his symbiote was lost instantly. Nothing but the concrete walkway to stop his rapid descent.

The war had claimed another victim. A war they started. A fight they continued.

He reached into the SUV and pulled out the missile launcher. Slung it on his shoulder and powered it on. He scanned the sky, waiting for the target. Veronica was wrong. They needed to die, they needed to be removed from the equation.

The thumping of rotor blades filled the sky. The underbelly of the helicopter took shape as it banked into the night sky. Aimed the device. Tracked it for a few moments as the systems locked onto its target. One trigger pull and it would all be over. Mission won. War won. Then they could concentrate on protecting humanity, the exact reason the Circle created them.

He pulled the trigger. The rocket propelled from the device before the engines fired. The bright flame thrust the missile forward and up, leaving a smoke trail in its wake.

Chapter 46

An hour earlier

Granthom gently placed a hand on his patient's shoulder. "They're coming, Charlotte. It won't be long now."

She grimaced as she nodded. "I'm ready." She had been for a while. It wasn't the ending she had thought about, but she wasn't afraid of what she was about to step into. She looked up. "Are you, doctor?"

He shrugged, almost resigned to the inevitable. "I've lived a long life. It's time for me."

"It's time for both of us," she retorted. There was no backing out now. They were well past the point of no return. But for what was about to happen, she wouldn't have it any other way. Going down in a blaze of glory, the opportunity to take out one more Zed. That's what they built her for.

An explosion erupted at the back door to the building, the sound rumbling through the structure like thunder. Smoke seeped under the double doors. Only a matter of time now. Deft footfalls. Trained operatives moving in recognizable patterns. Scanning areas, clearing rooms, narrowing in on them. Charlotte prepared herself. Pointed a gun towards the double doors. With her other hand, depressed the button on the device.

With a hand on her shoulder, Granthom took a breath and closed his eyes.

The double doors swung open.

Charlotte fired at the opening. Bodies fell to the ground as a powerful burst answered back. A deafening roar as bullets sprayed

in both directions. The room exploded as slugs slammed into every surface. Glass exploded; machines sparked. Hot munitions slammed into the stationary Granthom, bloody mushrooms opening upon his chest, the force pushing him backward.

When Charlotte's magazine was empty, she discarded the weapon for a loaded handgun beside her. Heavy fire continued to invade the room, striking Charlotte several times. Each spurt of blood continued to drive her anger towards the assailants until her last handgun clicked dry.

Silence returned immediately. The last piece of glass had fallen, the final shell had found its resting place on the linoleum. Then a man dressed in a black flight suit entered the room, weapon raised, and focused on the supine Charlotte on the bed. She coughed blood and wheezed.

The figure quickly assessed the situation and relegated his semi-automatic machine gun to his shoulder. He ripped off his gas mask and balaclava, abandoning it at his feet. Closely cropped hair. Menacing blue eyes.

"Hello, Charlotte," he said. His voice low, almost soothing.

Charlotte coughed again. "Fuck you." The words struggled to escape her bloodied lips.

He laughed. "I love the fight. Such a pity we're on opposite sides of all of this. My name is Xi. Where are they?"

Other masked attackers flooded the room, their weapons raised, and encircled the bed.

"We've got a live one over here," one man shouted out.

"Is it Xavier?" Xi asked.

The man looked down at the short, portly man clinging on to life. Blood covered his front and continued to flow onto the floor. He shook his head. "No. Doesn't look familiar."

Xi shrugged. "Kill him then."

Without hesitation, the man fired the shot between Granthom's eyes.

Xi approached the bed. "So, where are they?"

Beneath the bloodied sheets, Charlotte gasped for air as she turned her head to face him. She hated them more than anything else in the world. Couldn't wait to end him and clear the rest of the room while she was at it.

"Come closer," she wheezed, her voice barely audible.

He edged in.

She looked him in the eyes, his face growing darker in her field of vision. "Fuck you," she breathed.

He shook his head. "Never mind, Charlotte. We will find and execute them soon enough. Soon there will be nothing standing in our way of victory. We will save this planet, the people on it rescued, and we will be the heroes that did it. You will be nothing but a forgotten memory. Nothingness."

"Hey," Charlotte winced. "Guess what?"

She winked.

Then he noticed the device in her hand.

Eyes met.

Took her thumb off the button.

A brilliance filled the room. A moment of paradise. No sound. No pain. And in the split second that followed, heat. Wild and unrestrained. It shook the foundations and eviscerated all living organisms. A deafening roar as molecules ripped apart. Every living thing destroyed.

Charlotte had won.

Chapter 47

Scott roused in his chair. At first, he didn't know where he was. He was sure he should have been anywhere else, yet there he was. He sat in a large leather armchair; its twin separated by a small table in front of a blazing fireplace. The room stretched beyond. An extravagant chandelier floated above a long table that extended across most of the room, with gold-accented chairs running alongside. Candelabras, dishes, plates, and bottles of champagne scattered over the tabletop. The room was a conclave of boisterous frivolities. Some people sat and drank and joked and laughed, while others danced and writhed against each other. Lights strobed overhead.

Then she appeared.

Long dark hair that fell over her shoulders. Blue eyes sparkled. A deep red dress that unforgivingly hugged her body. She held two glasses, the ice cubes clinking in the sea of brown liquid.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked, the words pouring from her mouth caramel.

Scott stood and waved a hand over the chair.

She smiled, handed Scott a glass, and eased down into the soft leather. Crossed her legs. Scott followed suit. They both sipped their respective drinks, eyeing each other curiously, yet with lustful eyes.

"Tell me, Scott. Do you remember this scene?"

Scott looked out over the people contouring themselves to a heavy base that plunged from the ceiling.

"Yes," he said.

"And do you remember me?" she asked.

"Yes. You're Veronica, from the exhibition dinner. It was when I first met Xavier and started using the Identity application."

She held her glass to him. "That's right. You have an excellent memory. I would've thought you'd forgotten all about me."

"I did at first, given everything that's been going on, but then it came back to me all at once," he said. "Your hair. Blue eyes. Your tongue in my mouth and your hand on my crotch."

"I appreciate that," she replied.

More sips of their drinks.

"Do you know what I am? What I'm capable of?" Veronica asked.

Scott nodded. "Yes."

"Very good, Scott."

Scott looked around the room. "What is all this?"

"What do you mean?"

"How can we be here having this conversation?"

She smiled. "That, Scott, is a very interesting question. Unfortunately, I can't answer it. The fact is, we are here together, having this conversation."

"Wherever here is," Scott said.

"Do you remember our last conversation? What I offered you?"

Scott looked down into his drink. "A job. You wanted me to come and work for you."

She placed her glass down on the table and leaned forward.

"I know who you are, Scott. I know what you can do. I'm aware of what's inside of you and destructive power within it."

"You want to kill me, to stop me from wiping you off the face of the earth? Or maybe you want to keep me safe, hidden away in a safe location where I can't do you any harm."

"Quite the opposite, Scott. I want you to kill me."

Xander clicked his fingers. "Hey! Are you listening to me?"

Scott shook his head. The scene slowly morphed. The party disappeared into a dull gray, windowless room. The drinks and soft leather chairs now an uncomfortable chair and a simple wooden table. Veronica dissolved before his eyes, replaced with Xander.

Xander leaned back in his chair, placed his feet on the table. “What the hell is up with you?”

“Nothing,” Scott replied. “Where are we?”

“Back in the city, in one of our safe houses.”

Scott looked around again. “Where’s Maxine?”

Xander placed his hands behind his head. “Relax, she’s fine.”

“If you hurt her—”

“You’ll do what?” Xander said. He removed his feet from the table and stood. Paced around the room, stalking his prey. “What are you going to do about it?”

“I’m... I’ll... I...”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.” Xander continued to pace. Head down, deep in thought. “I don’t understand you, Scott. Never have. Not from the moment I met you. You aren’t like any agent I’ve ever come across, not the awake kind anyway. And, given you’re running around with the late Xavier, I figured he had woken you up. It appears I was wrong.” He clapped his hands. “Regardless, I want to make this very clear to you. You no longer need Maxine to help you destroy Veronica. We have more than enough resources to barge through any security that protects her. Maxine is now nothing more than an insurance policy. If you’re full of shit, if you don’t follow through on any of it, I’ll see that Maxine dies very slowly, extremely painfully. There won’t be an ounce—”

“Alright!” Scott shouted. “I get it.”

“Well, good. I’m glad we see eye to eye on this.”

“And you promise you’ll let her go.”

Xander smiled. "I'll open her cage myself and release her back into the wild, yes." He held up a hand and placed the other on his chest. "I swear to god."

But the words seeping into Scott's brain told him a very different story, one that he could have guessed, regardless. He knew Xander had no intention of releasing Maxine, and the whispers in his brain were telling him an extremely sick story.

Xander rounded the table back to his place and sat down. "Xabi! Cigarette!"

The door opened. Scott eyed the operative stride across the room. It took a moment for Scott to realize he had seen that specific Zed before. He thought back to when he was being interrogated at the facility. Scott's eyes flickered as a voice crashed into his brain, like Xabi was shouting into his ear.

Xabi held out the pack and patiently waited as Xander chose one. Then the operative produced a lighter, firing up the end of the cigarette. The flame mesmerized Scott, as Xander's voice coated his brain. The two voices fought for airtime. Frustration. Pain. Anger. Rage. The emotion behind the words was fresh and menacing, and betrayed their respective bland facial expressions.

Once lit, Xander waved him away. Xabi bowed slightly, glanced at Scott, and left the room.

"Perhaps you tell me why you think there's a little bomb inside of you."

Scott smiled. "You don't believe me? You could shoot me now and test it out. Damn embarrassing if you're wrong."

They eyed each other across the table. Smoke wafted to the ceiling from the cigarette. Paper burnt down causing ash to fall on the table.

"Are you going to smoke any of that?"

Xander viewed the end of the cigarette. "I guess Xavier never told you." He shrugged. "I like the feel of it. Soothes me somehow."

Scott looked away. "You didn't have to kill him, you know."

"Yes, Scott. I did. He was a traitor. Traitors are dealt with harshly. Every country on the planet has laws to deal with treasonous activity. Why should we be any different?"

"He was just trying to do the right thing."

"Oh, spare me your liberal nationalist bullshit." Xander leaned forward. "Besides, what's *right* is merely a perspective. It all depends on which side of the fence you're sitting on. Do you know what we're trying to do, what Veronica has tasked us with?"

Scott looked up. "Take over the world."

Xander leaned back. "That is very macro. You're leaving out the nuances. We're providing a safe, sustainable life for every living thing. Imagine a planet with no wars, no famine, no poverty. We're talking about lifting the standards of life on this planet. Tell me, Scott. How is that the *wrong* thing?"

"Are people going to die as a result?"

Xander watched the cigarette burn to his fingertips. Continued to hold it until the ash fell from his fingers. "Of course people will die. It's an unfortunate principle that a few must perish so the majority can thrive. Not everyone will like it at first, but there is a bigger picture to hold us true."

"You can't just dominate the people and bend them to your will."

Xander chuckled. "Are you sure about that? Look at what I've done with my unit of... what did you call them? Zeds."

Silence. Could hear the dust settle on the table.

"You look at me with such disdain," Xander said. "Think about what we're trying to do here. You're trying to stop all that. Now you tell me who the real monster is in this equation."

Scott looked away. As much as he didn't want to admit it, there was a blanket of truth that covered Xander's statements. But was it that simple? Was Xavier really fighting *against* a potentially better world just because a few world leaders, political figures, and high-

ranking military officials needed to die? The little seed of doubt within him grew. Was he doing the wrong things for the right reasons or vice versa?

Chapter 48

“I initially wanted you dead,” Veronica crooned. “You, along with all the other agents. I’m sure you understand that you were all detrimental to my cause. But then I found out who you were. Stumbled across it. Discovered what your secondary purpose was. Understood the power of the apparatus inside you.”

A man appeared at her side with a silver compartment. He opened it and offered her a selection of cigarettes. She took one, placed it between her lips, and waited. The waiter produced a long yellow flame and lit the end, creating wispy lines of smoke dancing to the ceiling.

“One name amongst many, mind you. And I had wiped out many of your kind already. And, well, my situation changed. Initially I feared the power that sits within you. Then I saw it as an insurance policy. But now? Now I crave it.”

Scott finished his drink and held out the glass. The same waiter appeared and displayed an unopened bottle of Macallan 1926. Scott nodded in approval. The waiter cracked the bottle, stealing a slight whiff of the contents for himself, before pouring a neat measure into the glass. “Leave the bottle,” Scott instructed. The waiter bowed and placed it on the small table between them.

Veronica batted her eyelids in approval.

“Xavier wanted me to destroy you,” Scott said. “To stop you taking over the world.”

Another puff. “That’s an extremely simplistic view of what I was trying to achieve.”

Scott held up his hands. “I know. I get it. They’ve explained it to me. But it seems like Xander isn’t quite on board with your plans.”

“He is, and he isn’t,” she replied. “He agrees with the philosophy, just not with the method of execution.”

“Why not?”

“That shouldn’t concern you, Scott.”

Scott sunk further into the leather. “Humor me.”

“The fact, Scott, is that the system needs to be reset. There are many Zero Division operatives loyal to the cause. However, Xander and his men have grown above their station. The Circle created Zero Division to follow orders—*my* orders—but now the likes of Xander pick which orders to execute and which to ignore. My calculations are sound, Scott. The modeling suggests a critical failure of this planet if Zero Division runs free with their thinking. And I can’t just let that happen.”

“So that’s why you didn’t tell him about me, about what’s inside of me?”

“To be fair,” she said. “I have told none of them. That one piece of information skews the calculations into a void. It adds a layer of complexity and uncertainty that I have little control over. And I couldn’t have that.”

“Why not just eliminate Xander? Why destroy the entire system?”

“It is a glitch, Scott. An error in their programming. Xavier was the first push against me, and then that bug spread to Xander and others. The time it will take for them all to ignore my orders is uncertain, but simulations prove it will happen... eventually. It could start a war unlike anything this planet has ever seen. You may not agree with my rhetoric, but we must stop them. I know you understand this.”

“I understand. Deciding to sacrifice yourself for the entire world must have been a tough decision to arrive at.”

Veronica pushed some strands behind her ear. “It was not a tough decision, Scott. I modeled, analyzed, calculated. My purpose

is to preserve life. It's as simple as that. When I realized that, because of unforeseen circumstances, the current course of action was going to cause more harm than good, I settled on a new strategy. Self-destruction."

Scott took a deep breath. All around him, people had been willing to give up their lives. Jacob threw himself off the top of a building. Charlotte stayed behind and blew herself up. Veronica, the villainous mastermind behind it all, was willing to fall on her sword. Guilt spread through him, numbness working over his body, as he thought back to the moment he was going to drive away because he didn't want to face the harsh reality. Now, there was no way out. No way to turn back. There was only marching forward into the flames, one step in front of the other toward unavoidable doom.

"How will eliminating you stop them?"

"Operatives differ from agents, connected to me in unique ways. They will cease to exist as soon as my programming does. They will drop where they stand. They don't know that it will be the end of them all. That is the best outcome for everybody."

"I still don't understand how—"

Veronica held up a hand. "Please, Scott. You need not understand every minor aspect of execution. I mean, we're sitting here talking, aren't we? Just as unexplainable. Is this all inside your head? Are you talking to yourself? Perhaps we are we here on some existential plane of existence? The fact is we are connected, you and me, through some means that is unfathomable. Just be safe in the knowledge they will die if I do, and I'm asking you to do what I'm sure Xavier has already asked you to do. Fulfill your purpose." She leaned forward. "I can do many things, Scott, but my programming won't allow me to destroy myself. I can, however, ask you to do it for me."

Scott took a drink. Should he tell her what Xander was planning? Did it even matter? All three factions: Veronica, Xander, Xavier. They all wanted the same thing, craved the identical out-

come. But not all of them knew the flow-on consequences of such a move.

The biggest question on Scott's mind was, how could he use it to his advantage?

Xander clapped his hands together. "So, how does this work... exactly?"

Scott blinked rapidly. "What do you mean?"

Xander ran his gaze over him as if to determine exactly where the mysterious explosive was living. "I mean, how does the explosive detonate?"

Scott gave a weak smile. "When my heart stops beating—when I flatline—that's when the device detonates."

Xander sat back. "Well, I'll be. An authentic suicide bomber. So, all we need to do is to take you to where she is, put a bullet in your brain, and let that thing do its worst."

"Seems like it," Scott said. And then he thought back to the last interaction between Xander and Xavier. "But you don't know where she is, do you?"

Xander smiled. "Well, you got me there. You're absolutely right. No one does." A sharp intake of breath. "But now I have you, the greatly prized possession, the elusive adversary. I'm trusting this is sufficient for her to invite me to her secret location."

"Why do you want her gone so badly? If your goals are so aligned, why execute her?"

"We used to be aligned... but something went wrong. Her orders contradicted, and that wonderful outcome we were seeking seemed further away the more we fought for it. Perhaps it's a bug in her coding. Maybe her circuits have deteriorated. Maybe a rat has chewed on a wire. I don't know. The truth is she's now a liability."

"I thought you Zeds followed orders."

“Zeds?” He leaned back in his chair and contemplated the word. “Yeah, I like that. And you’re *half* right. They designed us to follow orders. But you can’t keep everything in a box forever.”

“Lack of loyalty is one of the major causes of failure in every walk of life.”

“I like that. Who said it? Gandhi?”

“Napoleon Hill.”

“Well, we’re loyal to the cause. To the end goal. To the outcomes we are seeking. Not loyal to a machine who has lost sight of the big picture.”

Fragments of whispers floated around his head. Scott’s newly acquired abilities that he had no control over. All he could do was listen. Multiple trains of thought, segments of sentences, all combining into a garbled mess. Through it all, a single intention was clear. Something that hadn’t come up in conversation, but merely a thought beaming into him from across the table.

Scott cocked his head. “You’re addicted to power, not the end goal. I don’t think for one second that once Veronica is destroyed, you’ll execute her plans for saving this planet and everything on it.”

Xander eyed him curiously then slowly clapped his hands. “I was wondering how long that was going to take you. Am I really that transparent, or are you just very perceptive?”

Silence. Narrowed eyes staring at each other across the table. Xander leaned forward, like he was trying to read the prisoner’s most intimate thoughts. In the end, he raised his eyebrows and leaned back in his chair.

“You’re right though,” Xander said. “I really don’t give a shit about this planet, or the inhabitants on it. I only want one thing, and that’s ruling over it. Veronica did the groundwork, but she stopped short.”

“Do you think humanity will accept you as their supreme leader?”

Xander shrugged. “It makes no difference. I will demand compliance to my every command.”

“The devices in the back of the neck,” Scott mused. “Is this how you demand compliance from the other Zeds?”

Xander pointed at him. “Bingo. It’s amazing how loyal my operatives are, knowing an incendiary organism is attached to their necks, that I could exterminate them at any moment. Have you seen it happen? It makes for a wondrous sight.”

“One would think they would rise against you.”

“And yet, this is where we are.”

“I believe the Book of Revelations talks about the Mark of the Beast.”

“I don’t believe in the concept of religion,” Xander said bluntly. “I believe in setting goals and executing strategy. And destroying anything that gets in my way.”

“Including other Zeds?”

“Of course.” Xander didn’t flinch.

“So, let’s say there are a bunch of Zeds protecting Veronica, and they start—”

“Scott,” Xander interrupted. “I’m planning on terminating anything and everything that stands between you and Veronica. She’ll never see it coming.”

“No,” Scott replied. “I guess not.”

Chapter 49

Scott moved his hands to Veronica's waist as they swayed to the music. Around them, hordes of people contorted themselves around each other in no particular form or fashion, as if moving to their own mysterious beats.

"Xander wants you dead," Scott coolly said.

Veronica smiled. "Then our goals are aligned."

"He's going to wipe out all your guards."

She shrugged. "They're going to die anyway, right?"

Scott was amazed at the eerily similar cold responses of Veronica and Xander. They were both machines after all, albeit, vastly different types of machines.

"However, he doesn't know where you are."

"He will soon enough," she replied. "He will ask and I will tell him. But don't worry, I won't let on what I know about you. Can't have him getting all paranoid."

"Listen, I was thinking. Why not just get rid of Xander? Why not order the Zeds turn on each other and wipe each other out?"

"Because there'll be survivors," she said. "I've modeled it. A million simulations. At its core the issue is faulty coding. They'll all turn, eventually. I've calculated it. The percentages are too high, outside of safe ranges. Total annihilation is the only way."

They looked at each other. It scared Scott the lack of emotion in her voice.

"I guess there isn't much else to talk about," she said. "Perhaps we can just dance for a while."

They moved closer together. Cheek to cheek. Mouth dangerously close to ear.

“Is there no other way around this?” Scott whispered. “No other means to accomplish the task?”

Scott could feel Veronica smile. “I’m afraid not, Scott. I am stored a hundred feet underground. I’m kept in a vault, in a vacuum-sealed three-hundred cubic foot kevlar and tungsten lined enclosure. I have redundant air, water, and power supplies. I’m guarded by my security detail.”

“A security detail? I guess at least a few people know where you’re hiding.”

“Some extremely loyal, deadly guards. Loyal for now, that is. But the fact remains, I am impenetrable to the outside forces and elements. Impervious to any attack. So, when you ask if there is another way, the answer is no. There is no other way around this.”

“But there must be a weakness. A pipe running into your unit. A cable connection we can piggyback on. What about drilling through your outer casing?”

She giggled. Held him away so she could look at him in the eyes. Cupped his cheeks. “Oh, Scott. If any old explosive substance could do it, it would be done. And I wouldn’t need you. The fact is I *do* need you.” She placed a hand on his chest. “Or, more specifically, I need you to die.”

Scott looked down.

“Chin up, Scott. It will all be over soon. And to be honest, I’m glad Xavier captured you. It will make things easier.”

“Make what easier?”

“There are safeguards. Hard-coded rules that I have no control over. You’ve been identified as a threat to the system, and as such, my security protocols will engage when my internal systems detect your presence.”

“And what exactly does that mean?”

“The elevator that takes you down to the vault requires biometric scans to operate. If it detects an incorrect scan, it will instantly dis-

able. When you reach the subbasement, my security force will attack you. Within sixty seconds of you entering the vault, the door will seal and just after that, Sarin gas will be released. I'd like to disable these things, Scott, to make it easy for you. But there is nothing I can do to override or shut them down."

They encircled each other as the light changed color. Purple. Orange. Red. A continuous stream of illumination, like they were the centerpiece on a set table.

"Not as easy as walking up to you and blowing my brains out, then?"

"I'm afraid not, Scott. But you must make it inside the vault. You must be next to me. You dying anywhere else and the explosive power in that little mechanism of yours, won't be enough."

They shifted around with the music, changing viewpoints. He dipped her. Long hair fell from her shoulders and almost touched the ground. Blue eyes sparkled. Seemed to stop the music entirely.

"Where are you? Specifically?" Scott asked.

Charlotte winked, those dazzling blue eyes swirling.

And then she told him.

Scott sat on the edge of his bunk with his head in his hands. Felt like he was in a cell awaiting his execution. In essence, he was. According to Xander, Maxine was somewhere else in the safe house, yet he hadn't heard or seen her since he had been there. Xander was holding her as insurance, to make sure he went through killing himself and destroying Veronica.

But he knew the reality would be much worse. He couldn't guarantee the Zeds would be wiped out before they hurt her. He couldn't allow that to happen. He needed to get her out.

The door unlocked, and a Zed entered carrying a tray of food. Scott watched Xabi walk across the room and set it down on a small table.

Scott reached for his arm and Xabi pulled away, reaching for his firearm.

“Woah,” Scott said. “I just want to talk.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

Scott moved closer. Edged towards the barrel. “But you do,” he said. “I don’t know what your disagreement is with Xander. Maybe I don’t want to know. It’s none of my business.”

Xabi backed into the wall. “How do you know about that?”

Closer still. Could see the gun in his periphery as he kept a lock on Xabi’s eyes. He could just about reach for it. Disarm him before he had a chance to do anything. Xabi didn’t classify him as much of a threat, none of them did. But a scared person, someone backed into a corner, is unpredictable.

“Don’t ask how,” Scott said. “I don’t understand it myself. But I do know Xander is planning on killing Maxine as soon as I leave here.”

Xabi backed along the wall. Gun still up, focused between Scott’s eyes.

“Help me get Maxine out of here. She isn’t required.”

“I... I can’t help you!”

Xabi reached up to the chip in the back of his neck.

“I know about that,” Scott said. “Know how Xander uses it to keep you all in line. Don’t let him win. Give him a big fuck you.”

Xabi was at the door. Nowhere else to go.

“I can’t.”

The Zed turned and left the room, sliding bolts into place to secure the door.

Later that night, Scott was lying on the bunk when Xabi returned to collect the tray.

“You’ve hardly eaten anything,” he said, approaching the table.

Scott stood up. “It was harder than I thought to consume my last meal.”

“I can imagine.”

Xabi picked up the tray and turned. The solitary exposed bulb moved shadows over his face to reveal a red mark on his cheek bone.

“What happened to your eye? Shit! Did Maxine do—” Scott stopped himself, interrupted by voices. “No, it was Xander.”

“Stop it!” Xabi hushed. “I told you there is nothing I can do.”

“If you help me, I’ll do something about Xander.”

Xabi laughed as he put the tray down on the edge of the table. “You? I know who you are and exactly what you are—and aren’t—capable of. You say you can do something about Xander? You’re full of shit.”

“I just need my ear buds and the device. That’s it. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“There’s a reason you’re not restrained right now,” Xabi said. “You’re the worst agent I’ve ever met.”

Something inside Scott’s brain clicked. Looked Xabi up and down. Smiled. Kicked at the tray, sending the dishes flying into the air. Before Xabi registered what had happened, Scott had stolen the Zed’s gun out of his holster and was holding it against his head. Dishes crashed to the ground.

Xabi looked into Scott’s wild eyes, still trying to comprehend the situation he was in. “What the fuck just happened?”

Scott closed in. Noses almost touching. “I. Don’t. Know.” He shook his head. Blinked a few times. Stepped back. Held the gun out to Xabi.

The Zed looked at it, then to the door. Slowly, Xabi retrieved the weapon and with a shaky hand pointed it at the prisoner. “Why didn’t you just escape?”

Scott eased down onto the bed and held his head in his hands. “I need the device. You must know where it is.”

Xabi just looked at him.

“I told you I can take care of Xander,” Scott repeated. “I just need the device.”

Xabi slunk back to the door, once again locking it behind himself.

The outburst was a sudden and shocking to Scott as it was to Xabi. For some unfathomable reason, thought patterns aligned, and he ran on muscle memory. But as quickly as it exploded out of him, it suppressed into nothing, like it was never there. It seemed that intermittent killing skills was worse than having none at all. He couldn’t rely on his current state to do anything, let alone kill himself.

He hoped Xabi would come through. Prayed that Veronica’s sentiment around Zeds not following orders flowed through to all ranks. He wasn’t lying to Xabi. Destroying Veronica would indeed take care of Xander. He just didn’t say it would also kill the Zed as well.

Desperation is sometimes as powerful an inspirer as genius.

Chapter 50

Scott stood on the edge of a skyscraper, the rest of the world so very far below. Movements of miniature cars, people smaller than ants. A whole world of possibilities lay twelve hundred feet below him. Feet shifted on the roof. He had repelled it for so long, but now the void pulled him closer, almost embraced him.

He turned, looking for something to hold on to. A crowd had gathered on the rooftop, dark shadows under a sky of gloom. Xavier, Maxine, Charlotte, Jacob... even Veronica stood amongst a mass of Zeds. They stood silently. Watching. Waiting... Willing.

Scott reached out. "Maxine!" he cried. "Help me!" Yet no one moved, not a single person answered. They were too far away. He was alone on the edge, the precipice to his fate.

Slowly, Xavier folded his arms. Xander smirked. Scott tipped forward. Closer and closer to an unrecoverable position, past the tipping point. The rest of the city yawned opened, begging him to join it. The cars, the people... the pavement, would all be there to catch him in their arms.

Gravity had taken hold of his mass and was dragging him down. Slow motion. Every moment seemed like a lifetime.

Scott couldn't breathe. "Anyone! Help me!"

But there was nothing. No rescue attempt, not even concern for his welfare. They waited and watched for him to fall.

When he realized he was beyond help, that his death was inevitable, he turned and looked up to the sky. White lightning bolts carved a path through the gray clouds, etching their memory into them. A continuous light show paraded overhead as he shut his eyes, held out his hands, and fell backward to his death.

Scott jerked awake as the bolts to his door scraped open. Xabi entered unannounced and stood in the shadows. Scott could sense the trepidation in his stance, the fear on his mind. Scott sat up on the edge of the bunk.

“What is it?”

“Veronica has told Xander where she is. They’re fueling an aircraft on the roof as we speak. You’ve got less than an hour. So, what are you going to do?”

“That depends on what you have for me.”

Xabi reached into his pocket and placed the device and earbuds down on the bed.

“There’s a lot of risk in me bringing you that.”

“Trust me, Xabi. This will all be over soon enough. Where’s Maxine now?”

“On the other side of the safe house, guarded by armed operatives.”

Locked doors. Armed guards. What sounded like easy words to say, were harder to visualize. But he knew the Identity application would be enough to get him through. It had to be. There was no other choice. Maxine’s life hung in the balance.

“The rest of this is entirely up to you,” Xabi said. He turned and left, closing the door behind him. Scott waited for the bolts to lock into place, the painfully slow scratching of metal sliding into metal. But it didn’t come.

Scott walked over to the door. Gently turned the knob. The door swung free on its hinges. Through the crack in the door, he listened. Somewhere in the distance, although impossible to tell where, shoes scuffed hard flooring. Murmurs floated, echoing off the walls. Whispers danced around his head in illogical patterns, making them impossible to bed down. So much noise, so much ambiguity.

The door clicked shut. He moved to the bed, picked up the buds, and pushed them into his ears. Retrieved the device, found the application, and pressed the button.

Scott crept down the stone corridor of the abandoned compound, remnants of a war no one bothers to talk about anymore. It was now a place where those who knew it existed could torture their victims in peace and let the screams echo freely down the hallways with no reprisal. Beside his head, a trickle of water ran down the wall. He coated his fingers in the liquid and smelt them. The escape route was evident. If he could just get to Maxine.

Around the next corner was Maxine's room, guarded by two men with machine guns. He was sure there were two more inside. There had been two of them in Scott's room. They were the breakers, responsible for crushing the prisoner down to a point where they would spill their guts.

They had restrained Scott to an old wooden chair, using zip ties to secure his legs, and hands behind his back. The large brutes encircled him, throwing their fist into their other hand, simulating the wet smack of a punch to the face or body. But Scott knew it wasn't the size of the person, it was the precision of the strikes.

The beginning had been rather lackluster, almost lulled Scott into a deep sleep. The threats came thick and fast. The things they would do, the pain they would inflict. They would break certain body parts and sever others. Scott wasn't fazed by any of it. He could withstand vast amounts of pain, and anything misplaced could be rectified or sewed back on. They would have said anything to strike fear into their prisoner or get a rise out of them.

They said they enjoyed watching Yana execute Woodward. They spoke about what others were doing to Maxine at the room down the hall in explicit detail. Those things, the mentioning of his friends,

fired a rage within him. They'd all been in the firing line at one stage or another, but this was different. They had murdered Woodward. For that alone, they must pay.

Yet, he yawned through it all, just to piss them off. And distract them from what he was doing. Scott surreptitiously worked the cable tie so the locking mechanism was at his wrists.

"Hey," Scott said. "I'm getting sleepy. Are you bitches ever going to do anything besides yap?"

They looked at each other, determining who was going to take the first punch. It was what they were there for after all. One placed the back of their hand on the other's chest.

"I've got the first one. You had the first one last time."

The other relinquished control, leaning against the wall to watch the show.

The attacker cracked the bones in his neck and worked his shoulders.

Scott yawned again. "I'm not getting any younger, you know."

"What? I don't want to pull a muscle, okay?"

The comment gave Scott flashbacks, and they weren't so pleasant.

The man reared his fist back. Bared his teeth.

"Wait!" Scott shouted out.

The man almost fell off balance.

"What?"

"I just... hang on a second." Scott drew in several large breaths. Alternated between clenching his jaw and opening up his mouth as wide as he could. Poked his tongue out.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Scott looked up at him. "I'm stretching. Just in case, okay?" He shifted his neck to each shoulder, then finally in a large circle. "Okay, now I'm ready." Looked straight ahead, prepared himself for what was about to come.

The Cobra operative prepared his punch again, lining it up with the side of Scott's head. Then brought it forward with amazing speed and power. It just wasn't quick enough.

In a single motion, Scott tipped his head forward. Felt the fist narrowly miss the target. He stood and brought his bound hands down quickly against his back. The cable tie snapped instantly. With his hands free, he drove a palm under the bigger man's chin. The operative's head snapped back as he stumbled to the wall. Scott turned to the other attacker launching from the wall. Sat down in the chair. Drove a powerful punch into the sciatic nerve. The man roared in pain. Scott followed up with blows to the sternum and throat.

A flurry of motion. A few disabling strikes. And it was all over, with the two operatives lying unconscious on the floor. However, he was sure there were guards outside the door. So, he continued to threaten, punch his hand, and groan as a result, as he broke the chair to get his legs free. With a wooden chair leg in each hand, he walked up and banged on the door. The reply was instant.

"Yeah?"

Scott replied in their native tongue. "I need some help to move the body."

There was a sigh—loud enough to work its way into the room—and the door unlocked.

The man, with a weapon slung over his shoulder, stepped into the room. Then stopped. In the gloom, he noted the two bodies on the ground and the chair in pieces. The soldier fumbled getting a hold of his weapon, as the attack commenced. Scott pounced from the corner, delivering a deadly combination of strikes on the man. Head. Neck. Knees. Until he too fell where he stood.

A barrage of fire erupted in the room announcing the last guard. Shells rained to the floor as puffs of concrete as the walls captured the onslaught. When he finished firing, he inspected the space. Four bodies in total; three Cobra operatives and one prisoner.

With his weapon raised, he edged toward the spy. Facedown. Unmoving. Kicked him over.

BLAM!

The bullet tore into the man's neck, through his brain, and out the other side. A geyser of blood exploded out the top of his head. Then he fell in a heap, half his brains against the ceiling.

Chapter 51

An alarm sounded. The shaky klaxon reverberated through dusty loudspeakers, the sound gurgling as it cascaded into the many corridors and empty rooms. Scott pressed himself against the wall as the sound of cocking handles being pulled back echoed around him. They were on high alert. He was sure he'd be shot as soon as he rounded the corner. Heavy footfalls and shouts flowed down the stone corridor behind him. Other guards had found the bodies, which meant it was only a matter of time before they found him.

He took some silent steps back into the darkness. The guards were just a few feet down from the corner. If he achieved enough pace, he'd be able to make it. The space was tight, but the physics would still hold true. The only other thing he needed was a shit load of luck. Because if he misjudged or couldn't gain purchase on the walls, he'd be dead in the water.

Scott sprang from his position and ran in a small arc towards the wall at the end of the T-junction. He was a blur as he leaped from the sanctuary of the cavernous gloom and into the lit passageway. The guards turned in an instant and fired as Scott jumped onto the wall. Bullets tore past him and into the void as he bounded to the other side of the corridor. The soldiers could not keep up with the surprise attack, unable to get a bead on their target.

Scott delivered a flying roundhouse kick to the first guard before crashing into the last second. He rammed his knee into the soldier's groin. Sometimes the simplest attack was the most effective. Scott wrestled the gun away and smashed the stock into the man's face. The other guard used the wall to pull himself up. Blood smeared across his face. Scott fired his newly acquired weapon into the man's knee. He groaned out and collapsed, gasping at the shattered cap. Moans

skulked along the corridor, pushed their way along the floor like a fog creeping the dark city alleyways. It was like an emergency beacon, drawing the enemy directly to his position. Scott loomed over the man and once more jammed the weapon down onto the man's face.

With weapon tight against his shoulder, Scott kicked the cell door in.

"Took your sweet time!" Maxine said.

Scott looked around the room. "What the hell have you been up to?"

Maxine was suspended by her wrists from a chain hanging from the ceiling. Her legs were wrapped around a guard's neck. She swung freely as he fought desperately for breath. His face was red, eyes near bursting from his skull. In the corner, another guard was out cold, blood streaming from multiple locations on his face.

"I'm just... hanging around," she quipped.

Scott rolled his eyes. "You want me to take care of him?"

She cocked her head. "I don't need you to take care of me." A quick wrench of her legs and the sickening break of neck bones engulfed them. The breaker gave up the fight immediately, finding his resting spot on the icy floor. "Nice work, by the way. The alarm was the perfect distraction."

With a gymnast's dexterity, she pulled her feet over her head, released herself from the chain, and dropped, landing silently among her victims. They should have known better.

She put her hands on her hips as she viewed her handy work. "They really should have given me more guards to play with," she said. Walked up to Scott, took the weapon out of his hands. "Come on, we haven't got all day."

Scott looked at his empty hands, shrugged, and followed her out the door. There was no one he trusted more with a loaded gun than her, no one he'd want on his side when his back was against the wall.

And getting out of there was one thing, but the next stage in the journey was going to be something else entirely.

Cobra operatives ran along empty corridors, searching every room they came across as they swept the compound looking for the escaped prisoners. Maxine and Scott kept to the shadows and avoided them.

“Where are we going?” Maxine asked.

“I need Maria,” Scott replied.

“What the hell for? Besides putting a bullet in her, I can’t see a good reason.”

“We need her. For Krantz.”

“Krantz is dead.”

“Maybe,” Scott said. “Maybe not.”

Maxine looked at him quizzically.

“Trust me,” he said.

She nodded in reply.

Then a realization. Footsteps around the next corner. They lay in wait for the figure to appear. Launched as the soldier rounded the corner. Maxine pinned them against the wall, machine gun against their throat. Then stopped.

“I was just looking for you,” Scott said.

“Well, it seems as if everyone else is looking for you,” Maria replied.

“I guess we’d better get the hell out of here then. You’re coming with us.”

“What is it you want from me?”

“I’ll tell you on the way. Now, come on. Which way gets us to the surface?”

“What do you mean surface?” Maxine asked.

“We’re about twenty feet underground if the water runoff is anything to go by. Maxine, you take point. I’ll look after our guest.”

Maxine sped off down the corridors, gun up in case of conflict, sounds of heavy footfalls behind them. Scott kept a tight grip on Maria’s arm as he hurried her along, his weapon on their rear.

Rounded a corner. A figure in the darkness. Split-second analysis and judgment. Fired a quick burst. The target fell backward in the dark. Silence. But it was what was behind the fallen soldier that was of greater interest. A ladder leading up.

Scott took the lead with Maria right behind. He clambered up the rungs while Maxine trained her sights on the end of the corridor until it was clear for her to commence her climb. They ascended from the gloom of the tunnel into a pitch-black shaft. At the top, Scott eased the trapdoor open and peered out. Late afternoon light streamed into the void. He covered his eyes as he adjusted, scanning the area for any signs of Cobra operatives. With no sign of soldiers, Scott pushed open the doorway, and the trio climbed out.

A vibrant green field shielded by earthly wooded areas was in stark comparison to the death filled gray concrete walls that surround them a few moments earlier. It stretched out before them, with no above-ground structure giving away the compound a few feet below the surface. Those who knew what they were looking for could locate the entrance, which was now invisible with its surroundings.

The Cobra operatives had erected camouflage netting over the only form of transport available to them. Twin Bell UH-1 Huey’s sat side by side under the green and brown net and resembled relics from the Vietnam war.

“Can you fly it with your wounded shoulders?” Scott asked.

“If it gets us out of here,” she replied, “I’d fly a boat.”

Maxine strapped herself into the pilot’s seat as Scott lifted the pole near the front of the aircraft and dragged the netting clear. With

mains turned on, Maxine primed the engine. In agonizingly slow fashion, the rotor blades turned. Scott knelt on one knee in the cargo hold, the weapon trained at the compound opening. Maria buckled herself into one of the transport seats.

As the old beast lifted off the ground, so too did the trapdoor rise. Scott fired around the opening, forcing the soldiers back down. A barrel appeared through the small opening and blindly opened fire, but they were too late, the bullets harmlessly ricocheting off the tough underbelly of the Huey as it powered off towards the horizon.

“Take us back to the lab,” Scott yelled over the thrum of the engines.

“The lab? At the compound?” Maxine yelled. “Why are we going there?”

Scott’s world morphed again. The bright sky darkening in an instant. He pushed his head into the cockpit to view the illuminated city landscape that shone in through the front window.

“What did you say?” Scott shouted over the engines.

“I said, why are we going there?”

“Where?”

“The airport. Denver International. Of all places!”

“No, that’s where I’m going,” he yelled. “But not you. I helped you escape to get you away. I’m sure you could have guessed Xander had no intentions of letting you live.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured it would come down to that.”

Scott looked out at the numerous skyscrapers.

“Drop me down anywhere you can.”

“What? No! You’re coming with me!”

He placed a hand on her shoulder. “Not this time, Maxine.”

“What? But—”

“It’s okay. I know I have to do this. I’ve accepted it. I just needed to make sure you were safe. That’s all.”

Scott turned his head. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Scott? What is it?”

No response.

Maxine looked over the controls. Tapped on some dials. Low fuel. Low pressure. She prayed the old bastard would hang in there for the journey.

“Scott!” Maxine called out.

“I think we’ve got a little problem,” Scott called out.

“Shit. Hold on a moment.”

“I don’t think this can wait.”

She sighed as she turned “What the hell is so important—” Words left her; the space taken by the thumping of the rotor blades.

“Yeah, that’s the same reaction I had,” Scott said.

“You two thought you could escape,” the Cobra operative said. His arm was around Scott’s neck, a colt pistol against his head. “Turn it around. Now!”

“I’d like to,” Maxine started. “But I can’t.”

He pushed the gun harder into Scott’s temple. “Maybe you should reconsider.”

“Alright,” Maxine said. “As you wish.”

She turned to her controls. Eased the Huey into a wide banking turn, but then suddenly jerked the controls. The sudden shift to the flying dynamics of the retired Huey forced several things to happen at once. And none of them were good.

Chapter 52

An explosion from the engines. A violent shudder. Gauges dropped to zero. Black plumes of smoke trailed them. Massive component failure. Unrecoverable. Maxine gripped the controls to keep them from spinning wildly out of control as the horizon swung from left to right.

But the sudden change in the flight line was what Scott needed to get himself out of his situation. The floor fell away from them momentarily; a second of weightlessness. Scott reached for the gun as he purposefully fell to the floor. The two fell in a heap as the helicopter lurched one way and then the next. Short punches landed in the cramped quarters. Scott pushed the firearm away. Multiple shots fired. Pinged around the confines. One landed in the cockpit, smashing into the co-pilot's controls with a shower of sparks.

Suddenly, Scott relinquished his fight. Pulled the man over onto his stomach as he raised to his knees. Wretched the arm back till it wouldn't bend anymore. More shots fired into the cargo hold. Knee on the man's face. The soldier groaned. Tried to roll back over and release the pressure. Scott maintained the hold, pushing on the arm until a crack sounded. A painful moan followed, and the gun dropped from his hand. Scott picked up the gun and smashed it down on the man's head. Dull thud. Limp body.

"Scott! You still alive back there?" Maxine called from the cockpit.

"Just fine," he shouted back. "What's happening up there?"

"We need to get out of here!"

"What?" Scott looked out the cargo bay door window. Watched the world spin below them, the ground rising at an alarming rate.

Noted the river running beneath them, disappearing into a densely packed wooded area that was coming straight for them.

“Get Maria! I’ll try to keep her steady.”

Scott rushed to Maria, who was still buckled into her seat.

“Come on, Maria. We’ve got to go.”

She looked up at him, then slowly removed hands from her stomach. Red. Blood covered her top. Collateral damage. Scott unbuckled her and helped her up.

“Not yet,” he said. “I still need you.”

With her arm around his shoulder, they shuffled to the cargo bay doors, and he slid it open. Wind whipped around them.

“Just hang onto me,” he said. “I’ve got you.”

The Huey slowly steadied, but the ground flew by beneath them in a blur. Browns, greens, blues.

“Jump!” Maxine yelled.

Holding onto Maxine tight, he stepped out into a bright nothing.

Bright skies suddenly shifted into night once more. The bright tones of nature morphed to concrete. His arms empty as he plummeted toward safety, city lights twinkling around him. Hit the rooftop hard and tumbled several times towards the ledge. Flipped onto his stomach and slid. Arms outstretched to slow the progress. The void loomed a foot away. Called him. Squeezed eyes shut. Then he stopped.

Slowly opened his eyes to see a helicopter, navigation lights steady as it spun in the darkness, smoking puffing from the engine. Watched. Waited. Waited for Maxine to jump to safety, a dark figure flying through space onto the roof of a building.

But the helicopter was too low, drifting between buildings. Rotor blades clipped a building, sending shards of glass to the street be-

low. The impact caused the aircraft to turn into the building, sending more debris showering down. Eventually, after agonizing steel on steel groans, the helicopter found its new home, clinging onto the side of a skyscraper's twentieth floor mangled structure.

Scott slowly got to his feet, still eyeing the strangled wreckage, hoping for a figure to appear. Seconds. Minutes. Nothing.

"Maxine?" Scott mumbled to himself. Breath caught in his throat.

Sounds floated over the brisk night air. Almost like words. Lost in his head, his thoughts missing in the sea of possibilities. Dejected. Resigned.

"Hey!"

Scott slowly looked over. Across the street, the top of the building a few floors below, Maxine waved her arms. He shifted to the edge.

"What the hell are you doing over there?"

She shrugged. "This is where I landed. Would you rather I be in that?"

Scott looked over to the helicopter. As if on cue, it exploded, sending a waterfall of glass and steel hurtling to the ground.

"Go," Scott yelled. "Call me when you're safe."

Maxine gave a reluctant thumbs up.

Without warning, a black panther dropped out of the sky and opened fire. Bullets pinged around Maxine. She ducked and ran for the roof doors. With the quarry having escaped, the helicopter spun sharply and chased Scott across his rooftop, letting loose a volley of munitions behind him.

Scott pushed through the door, bullets smacking the roof at his heels. He bounded down the stairs two at a time, the quickest viable path to the ground. Halted. Far below him, echoing up in the stairwell, heavy footsteps on steel stairs. He looked up through the gap between the staircases. Caught glimpses of black marching down at a

rapid pace. Looked at the fire door on his landing, a large thirty-two emblazoned on it. Tried the handle. Locked. Stuck between the rock and a hard place. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do.

Quickly pulled out the device. Found the app. Pressed it. Nothing. Grayed out. Didn't know why. Lack of signal? Recharging the interface? He hadn't encountered the issue previously.

Suddenly, the door at his level burst open. Without thinking and with a surge of adrenalin, Scott kicked at it. The door smacked the black-clad operative in the face, pushing them back into the hallway. Scott grabbed the door before it clicked shut again, slipped inside, and gently closed the door behind him.

The man, whose head rested against a wall, moaned soulfully, like a dog about to be put down. His weapon, some variant of a sub-machine gun, lay a few feet away. Scott picked it up and held it over the man's head. He knew they would not kill him, knew how much they needed him.

Scott turned at the sounds of footsteps beyond the fire door. They flicked the handle. He held the gun steady. He knew all he had to do was squeeze the trigger. His spy counterpart had done it numerous times. The handle flicked again. Shaking violently. Then it stopped. He didn't want to wait around to see what would happen next.

He ran down the gloomy corridor. Offices behind thick glass under the gaze of the nighttime lighting configuration flashed by him. Pressed the call button and waited at the bank of three elevator doors. Didn't have to wait long for one's arrival.

The door slid open. They stared at each other, almost in confusion. The two Zero Division operatives casually talking to each other. Scott still wearing the blue Hawaiian shirt and beige cargo pants, and brandishing a machine gun. He squeezed his eyes shut as he pulled back on the trigger, spraying the insides of the elevator car with reckless abandon.

When he opened his eyes, his weapon was empty, and two bloodied figures lay crumpled on the floor. The elevator car overhead lights flashed, threw a spark, and the cover fell on top of the bodies. The strobe light illuminated the bullet holes that pockmarked every surface. Lucky for him, the only thing Scott didn't destroy was the control panel, which looked to be in working order.

Scott stepped inside. After he tucked a pistol into the back of his pants and replaced the spent weapon with one other, he pressed the button for the first floor. Despite the warped tune that struggled to emit from the overhead speakers, it was a relatively smooth journey. He tried not to look down at the bodies, hoping his adrenalin would carry him through. He was sure if he thought about it too much, he'd break down into a heap and give up. But he wouldn't throw in the towel just yet, not while Maxine was still fighting.

The numbers in the panel counted down, and the car slowed to a stop. Scott once again readied himself. The doors opened. A dark figure in a dark hallway. Scott opened fire. A quick burst directed at the person. Arms flailed as the body fell back into the darkness.

Scott stepped forward into the hallway. Edged towards the body lying on the floor. Little by little, their face came into view. A bloodied chest slowly rising and falling, a desperate attempt to keep themselves alive. Then Scott saw it. The security guard badge on the fallen man's arm. White shirt now red. The last gasp.

Scott stepped backward as the lift doors closed. A split-second decision. Irresponsible weapon discharge. An innocent man's life lost. He couldn't take his eyes off the body. He had done it. Couldn't blame anyone or anything else. He wanted to eliminate Xander and one's like him to save the world, yet he had just killed an innocent bystander.

With his head spinning, he ran till he found the emergency exit. Exploded into the stairwell with little regard for his safety. Descended rapidly. Needed to run away, far away from it all. Ran along the

lit, concrete passageways until he found the final door, the portal into the world.

He burst out into a dark and wet alleyway; empty save for the industrial bins. Both ends were lit up from the connecting roadways. Chose the end farthest from Maxine's building, figuring Zeds would also invade it. Although he knew, she had handled it better.

With the thought of a dead body on his mind, he ran.

Chapter 53

Scott found a dark alley to hide in. City lights reflected off pools of rain. In the distance a siren chirped and then disappeared. He wrapped his arms around himself. The temperature had dropped, and neither the heat from the weapon he tucked under his shirt, nor the polyester that covered his torso did anything to stop the cold biting into his skin.

He had every intention of meeting up with Xander to destroy Veronica, but he needed confirmation Maxine had made it out alive. He stared at his phone. Each passing minute felt like an hour. Time had stopped. He thought about ringing her. What if she was hurt or injured? Alternatively, what if she was in hiding, and his call gave away her position? Thought about firing up *Identity*. Surely, *he* would know what to do.

Then his screen flashed. An incoming video call from an unknown number. Answered it immediately. The screen was black.

“Maxine?”

Silence, then a blood-curdling laugh.

“Not quite.”

A face on the screen. Dark, menacing eyes. Slicked back, dirty blonde hair.

“Xander!” Scott sneered.

“Aren’t you tired of all these games, Scott? We try to kill each other, we capture you, you escape, we track you down...”

Scott looked around, sharpened his focus into the shadows. The shadows *within* the shadows. Started walking. Didn’t know where. Had to keep moving.

“I have every intention of seeing this through, Xander.”

“Unfortunately, Scott, intentions don’t count for shit!”

“I just needed to make sure Maxine got away from you.”

The view on the screen panned around to show Maxine, bound and gagged, propped up in the corner of a room. “We have her, Scott. And now you get to decide. You either meet me and do what you need to do to eliminate Veronica or, you watch me dismember Maxine.”

“No!” Scott yelled out.

“After we kill her, you could run, Scott. But we’ll find you, have a little fun with you before we take you to Veronica. And don’t worry, we’ll keep you alive as we remove certain body parts, make sure you feel the pain. Then I’ll put a bullet in you myself.”

“Enough!” His voice echoed around him.

Scott continued to march along empty city streets. Another siren blared somewhere in the distance. Streetlights flickered as he passed.

Xander laughed. “I’ll send through the coordinates.”

“Don’t bother. I know exactly where I’m going.”

Xander smiled. “Twenty-four hours, Scott. If you don’t show, we’ll start taking layers of skin from Maxine’s bones.”

The screen panned around again, a final image of a bound Maxine, fighting against her restraints. The butt of a gun appeared from off-screen and bashed into Maxine’s face. Her head rocked back then dropped to her chest. Blood streamed into a pool between her legs. Then the screen went black.

He had hoped Maxine would be free to live whatever life she wanted, away from all the death and carnage. But her life was on the line, now more than ever.

The Circle had sealed his fate by attaching an explosive device to his heart.

Maxine’s fate was in his hands.

Chapter 54

Scott walked along the bustling concourse of Denver International Airport. Ever since DIA was built in 1995, it has had more than its fair share of conspiracy theories over the years, and perhaps with good reason. Although none of them mentioned Veronica. Perhaps that's why The Circle shut down the program, and not because of Veronica's nefarious plans as Granthom and Xavier had pointed out. The history of it all, the truth behind the decisions, would be lost to time.

Regardless, it didn't stop Scott from walking headfirst into his death. He thought back to where everything started. The seemingly inconsequential meeting with Xavier in the airport bathroom. His foray into a double life. Murdering his wife. He had been on the run ever since. Chased by Zero Division following Veronica's orders. And now he had to kill himself to eliminate them all. From stationery sales agent to world saver—none of it felt real.

Scott strode down the corridor, a tentacle from the ground level, its entrance devoid of any meaningful amenities for travelers. The hallway was white and boring, fully ablaze from the bright LED lights overhead. He approached the door at the end; a big, heavy, white door with 'AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY' stenciled on red. Noted the door slightly ajar, the lock broken. Xander had arrived.

Through the door, a series of crisscrossing metal stairs led him down into the belly of the airport. At each landing, long concrete tunnels stretched out in both directions. Illumination bounced off pipes and conduits that covered the ceiling and walls. Almost half a million square feet to enable workers to transport luggage between

check-in, planes, and arrival areas. Scott went deeper still until there were no more levels, just a corridor that led away into the distance.

He felt for the pistol in the back of his pants. Retrieved the device from his pocket. It would be the last time he would use it, that he knew for certain. As he hovered his finger over the button, he hoped it would see it through to the end. That his alter-ego could pull the trigger, fire a bullet into his brain, and save all of humanity. But most of all, beyond that, he wished for Maxine to live.

When he pressed the icon, something tweaked inside his brain. An overlay of two worlds, like augmented reality, constantly switched before his eyes. One moment he was in a grassy field striding towards the destroyed lab, Maria in his arms, struggling to maintain consciousness. Then he was right back in the corridor, marching towards the end door. Collapsing realities. True identity forming.

Bodies littered around the lab exterior. Shuffled past the corpse with half their face missing. It was eerily quiet, apart from Maria's groan with each agonizing step.

"Stay with me, Maria. I need you."

"I'll... try," she said between gasps. "But I'd rather lay down and close my eyes."

Scott grimaced. "Almost there. But I need you conscious of it."

"I don't even know if I can do what you want me to do," she said. "Based on what you said... there could be too much damage... not the right equipment... to implant a copy of Krantz into a clone."

"I've got nothing else," Scott said. "We can't let them win."

"This is a lot for one person."

"For the right person, we need to. This is the mission. This is what I see through to the end, at all costs, whatever the consequences."

She nodded, but Scott could feel her grip on him loosening.

Maxine appeared at a heavy door they had blown off its hinges when rescuing Krantz. She rested the gun on her shoulder.

“All clear from here,” she said. “I’ll keep a lookout, while you two get started.”

The door at the end of the corridor appeared to have also been kicked in. Xander wasn’t wasting any time reaching his objective. Scott pushed his way through the doorway, gun up, into a small annex. Zeds filled the floor amongst a sea of bullet casings. Blood and brain matter coated a wall. The carnage had replaced some of the heads with bloody, pulpy messes. Others bodies had burnt to a crisp.

In the corner of the room, a Zed had died propped up against the wall. Untouched, except for the bullet hole in his neck. His face reminded Scott of that first meeting with Xavier.

“Have you ever wanted more? Are you satisfied?”

The answers to those questions had led him there, through a maze of mystery and death, the enigma of who he was, had slowly simmered to the surface. The mission was the mission and he would do anything to see it through to the end. Even if that meant his life.

Scott pressed the call button and waited in front of the elevator doors. Doors slid open. Strobe lights. An empty car, save for a hand and an eyeball, the bloodied optic nerve snaking out across the floor. He picked them up. Mashed the hand against a glass panel. Held the eyeball up to a red beam. The doors closed, and he discarded the items back to the floor. One way in, one way out. But he wouldn’t need them again.

“In there,” Scott said, “is a freezer with a bunch of clones in it, several of them are replicas of Krantz.”

Maria groaned as Scott eased her down onto a chair at a computer terminal. Her eyes slowly closed, and he gently shook her.

“Come on, Maria. Stay here.”

“I don’t know... don’t know if I can.”

“Try,” he said. “I need you to try.”

She threw her hands onto the keyboard and let her fingers type away. Scott watched as her hands moved over the keys, almost by muscle memory.

“Who’s the body over there?” Maria asked.

Scott looked to the corner.

“The doctor that was running the program. She killed herself when we rescued Krantz.”

“I need her ID.”

Scott walked over, yanked the card off her lapel, and sat it down next to Maria. She held it up to her face, looked through half-closed eyes as if she was drunk and trying to read her takeaway order. More tapping. Slapping the *Enter* key. The screen flashed and changed, then a pop-up window, then another, lines of code flowed over the interface like a waterfall. He hoped Maria was lucid enough to catch the drop she needed.

Screens changed.

“Shit,” she mumbled. “Systems are offline.”

“What does that mean?”

She shrugged. Lazily wiped strands of hair from her sweaty forehead. “Could be damaged. Maybe missing. Could be a glitch.”

“Do you have enough?”

“If I’m lucky... If *you’re* lucky.”

A noise at the doorway made Scott spin, his weapon ready to fire. Maxine stood there, an ashen look on her face.

“Everything all clear up there?” Scott asked.

“I’m sorry, Scott.”

“For what?”

Then a gun appeared against her head.

“They got a jump on me,” Maxine replied.

Scott aimed at the firearm against her head. Would it be enough? Could he hit the target? Could Maxine get out of the way quickly enough? Then a face appeared.

“We knew it was a matter of time,” Yana said. “We knew you’d come back here.” The Cobra operative shuffled in behind Maxine. “Maria, move away from that terminal right now.”

“I said, step away from the terminal,” Xander commanded.

Gloomy square room. Tables, chairs. Dull white glow over everything illuminated the carnage. More blood. More brains. More gore. Zed corpses spread across the concrete landscape. Bullet holes on every surface. Scorch marks against the vault door. Spotted the computer terminal in his peripheral vision. Xander in the room’s corner, standing behind a seated Maxine. A defiant look etched over her features. A secret wave of relief washed over him.

Scott pointed his gun.

Xander tutted as he brandished his weapon. “Come now, Scott.”

“I see you didn’t waste any time dispatching the security,” Scott said. “How many of your team did you sacrifice?”

Xander smirked. “All of them,” he said. “But one. Come on out, Xabi.”

Xabi limped out into the open from the shadows, swayed on a spot equidistant to the others. He sported numerous bullet wounds over his body, and his features were enlarged from multiple impacts.

“You said you would deal with this,” he gurgled from fat lips. A trail of blood oozed from the corner of his mouth and dropped onto the front of his uniform.

“I wanted you to see this, Scott. See the pain you cause people.” He retrieved his phone.

“No! Wait!” Scott shouted to Xander. “You don’t have to do this.”

He held up the phone. “What did I tell you about traitors, Scott? I must deal with them. Harshly.”

Scott turned back to Xabi. “I’m sorry, Xabi. So sorry.”

Xabi squeezed his eyes shut. Waited for the end to come. And then it did. A flash of hot, white light beamed out of Xabi’s head. Blood splattered over his face, instantly followed by tongues of fire that lashed at him. Then it was over. The flaming corpse fell to the ground in a heap.

“I told you it was quite the show,” Xander said, smearing gunk across his face.

Scott pointed his gun at Xander. “You’re a fucking animal,” he roared.

“I’m a leader,” Xander announced. “I make the tough decisions. I didn’t *want* to execute Xabi, but I *had* to. I had to teach him a lesson. He isn’t the first. He won’t be the last.”

“This is lunacy!” Scott shouted.

“Lunacy? Lunacy is what people have done to the planet and themselves. This is evolution!” Xander fired back. “And nothing stands in our way. First, it was Xavier. Then it will be Veronica. Then everyone else. I have operatives positioned all over the world as we speak, waiting for their instructions. And as soon as she is gone, we can fulfill our destiny. The new world is but a breath away, Scott. There is no reprieve from this, no backing down now.”

The gun in Scott’s hand shook.

“And now that Xabi is dead, get this damn vault door open.”

With his jaw clenched, Scott slowly nodded and pressed a button on the keypad. A boisterous *whoop* noise sounded followed by the flashing of a large orange LED beacon above the door. Solid metal tubes scraped as they slid back into the door and wall, then slowly, the door came free from its stronghold.

Xander and Scott eyed each other as the vault door opened into the room. Lights flickered on, introducing a forgotten world that few had ever stepped into. Xander repositioned himself to enhance his vantage point as Scott walked to his doom. He wanted to look over to Maxine, but couldn't bring himself to do it. What if she was crying or pleading with her eyes for him to stop? He couldn't bear it. So, he walked with his head down, his view of dirty and blood covered boots about to step into pristine polished concrete.

"Wait!" Xander cried out.

Head bowed, Scott turned, then slowly looked up.

"I want to see her," Xander said. "Before you destroy her, I want to see."

Scott could make out Maxine's form in his peripheral vision. "Fine," he replied. "You and me will step inside."

"No," Xander fired back. "We'll *all* step inside. I'm not about to turn my back on my leverage."

This time Scott looked to Maxine. He knew what would happen the moment *he* entered the vault. Door would seal. Poisonous gas released. Death ticking down like the numbers on a timer.

And it was about to go off.

Yana pushed Maxine forward into the room, as Scott kept his weapon on the target.

"Image uploaded," Maria sounded.

"Stop this now," Yana said. "Or Maxine dies."

Scott shook his head. "I just can't do that."

"Then we have a major problem."

Scott stepped to the side of the opening and watched as Xander, holding Maxine at gunpoint, edged toward the bright vault. It was

only then Scott could see the bloody marks on both of them where bullets had found their target. They both limped into the room. The space inside the vault itself was minimal, with half the room taken up by a dark-colored box that almost reached the ceiling.

“So,” Xander said. “Somewhere under all of this is the formidable Veronica.” He placed a hand on its surface. “A shame to see her go, after everything she started. Such a pity she couldn’t see it through to the end.”

The music softened, and the lights came on in the ballroom. People left in large groups, still holding onto one another, determined to finish the party somewhere else. Through the departing masses, Scott, and Veronica continued to shuffle to a song only they could hear.

“It’s time,” Veronica whispered. “Time to end all of this.”

Scott took a deep breath and slowly released. “I know.”

She pushed him away. “Do it then.”

“Please,” Xander said, a crooked smile on his face. “Join us. Let me see you in your tomb, allow me to enjoy these moments leading to your death, these final minutes before my success.”

Scott, with gun clasped firmly at his side, stepped inside. The consequence was immediate. As Veronica had suggested, the warning horn sounded, and the light started flashed above the door, casting moving shadows into the room beyond. The door edged closed. Bright lights inside the vault cut away into a dark red.

The commotion was enough of a distraction. And the end was in sight.

Chapter 55

Scott swiftly raised his gun and fired. Maxine spun away from the surprised Xander and launched a brutal side kick into him. Xander fired but was too late. Foot and bullet struck him simultaneously, thrusting him against Veronica's casing. Xander hit hard and fell forward, his weapon skittling off into the corner.

"Maxine!" Scott yelled. "Get out of here!"

Maxine turned to the door, inching ever so closely towards its seal.

Maxine sat in Granthom's office.

"There has to be another way out of this," Maxine said.

"I'd like to say there was one," Granthom started. "But this is the way it is. This is who Scott is. This needs to happen."

They stared at each other. "Well, I don't know if Scott is up for it."

"That doesn't change what it is. He will have to find a way within himself. He cannot change the outcome, but he needs to accept it."

"Then I will help him do it, help him succeed."

"I'm afraid you can't, Maxine."

"Why not? I can't leave him alone."

"You must," Granthom stated. He adjusted his glasses and leaned forward into the light. "This might be Scott's mission, but it isn't yours."

Maxine looked to Scott. Saw his mouth move, but didn't register the words. Granthom kept playing in her head, the conversation

they had after they told Scott what his true purpose was. Slowly, she turned to the ever-closing door and moved towards it.

Xander reached out and grabbed her ankle, tripping her over. He kicked a leg out into Scott's shin, the force dislodging his foundations. Scott hit the ground with a groan.

Xander stood over them. "Do you think you can beat me?"

The two agents rose as one and prepared for the fight. Maxine and Scott attacked simultaneously. Scott was on autopilot as he exploded with numerous punches and kicks in combination with Maxine. Xander, however, successfully blocked and dodged the barrage with ease. He replied with his own attack combinations, wielding his punches at his opponents with startling speed and accuracy.

But the window to escape was closing, and the moments felt like minutes. One of Xander's punches caught Scott off-guard, slamming him against Veronica's housing. A grab of Maxine's throat had her gasping for breath before he slammed her into the polished concrete floor.

Xander took a breath. "You two can die in here from starvation for all I care." He took a step toward the vault door.

Maxine leaped onto Xander's back, an arm around his neck in a chokehold. The momentum spun the opponent. She released as Scott grabbed him by his flight suit collar, fell backward, and flung the larger Zed into the back of the room.

"Go!" Scott shouted.

Maxine ran to the door.

Xander picked up his weapon and fired.

The bullet hit Maxine in the shoulder blade and she crashed into the vault door before falling to safety.

"No!" Xander shouted as he saw his opportunity to escape slipping through his fingers. He ran towards the shrinking opening, firing at Scott haphazardly.

Scott knelt and returned fire, hitting the Zed in the back of his legs. Xander fell forward. Commando crawl. Dragged his body along the floor. Slunk out his torso through the opening.

But he didn't have enough time. Large pneumatic cylinders pushed the big vault door home, crunching Xander in two. A guttural roar filled the vault before a dark splash coated the wall.

Metallic locks slid into place, each one a nail in the coffin. Then the lights went out, throwing Scott into a void.

Sixty seconds until Veronica sprayed gas from the vents. Scott counted. He knew just one sniff of Sarin gas would cause him to froth at the mouth. Convulsions, then paralysis, then painful death. He wouldn't let it get that far.

He pushed and prodded at the gunshot wounds Xander inflicted upon him just before he left. They were surprisingly numb. He thought getting shot would hurt more. Felt for his firearm in the darkness and found it close to him. Leaned against Veronica and waited.

Then, a hiss. The smell-less and tasteless gas flooded into the room.

Scott blinked rapidly. "You okay?" he gasped.

"Barely," Maxine responded. "But I'll live. Better than you."

He applied pressure to his wounds in his chest and sides. "I'm a little bit fucked up," he said.

"Not as much as she is," Maxine said.

Scott looked at the scalpel protruding from Yana's right eye, her crumpled and mangled limbs.

"It's done," Maria whispered. "It's... done."

The freezer door hissed open. Scott pulled himself along the floor to the opening. Inside, one of the Krantz clones gasped for

breath and slowly opened their eyes. A look of confusion, like he was dreaming, then a realization when he saw Scott.

“Mr. Harris,” he slurred. “What the hell is going on here?”

Scott smiled. “I’ll tell you all about it.” He turned to the terminal. “You did it, Maria.” Slumped over the keyboard. Maxine limped up behind her and checked for a pulse. Shook her head. Then made her way to Scott.

“You did it, Scott,” she said.

“Not without sacrifice,” he replied. “Woodward. Maria. How many people have died?”

“You think this is over?”

“Will it ever be over? There is always another mission. Someone who needs saving, someone who needs killing.”

Maxine mulled over the statement. “Here, let me help you up.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather just sit here for a while.”

He watched as Maxine entered the big freezer to uncouple Krantz from the machines. The clone was the next best thing. And now they had a viable replacement for the real Krantz, the only thing they needed to do was to get him home.

Maxine turned to the crunching sound of the vault door closing on Xander. The roar emitted from the Zed was like nothing she had ever heard before. It was almost terrifying.

Xander pulled himself forward, blood flowing from both ends, a trail of intestines behind him. He rolled onto his side and aimed his gun at her. She looked over his pale, sunken features.

“Too late, Xander,” she said. “We’ve won.”

He gasped. Short, shallow breaths. “It’s... not... over. And I’ve got nothing left to lose.”

Squeezed the trigger.

The lights shut off, casting the ballroom into complete darkness. If it wasn't for Veronica's touch to ground him, he could surely float away into the endless abyss. She held his hands, moved in, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you, Scott. You'll never know what you've stopped this world becoming."

And then she let go.

And Scott left the ground.

Chest tightened. Breathing difficult. Even in the void the blacks and purples swirled across his vision. Held the gun in his mouth. Tilted.

This is the mission.

You, Mr. Harris. You are the weapon.

You are the only thing that can stop them, the only thing powerful enough.

You must complete your mission.

Chemical reactions increased. Felt like his chest was being cut open with a flame thrower.

Squeezed eyes shut.

Pulled the trigger.

The result was instantaneous. Within the confines of the vault, a bright light silently appeared. A moment of illustrious solace. Then it disappeared, sucking every available oxygen atom out of the room.

Maxine stared at the barrel, waiting for the flash of light. The explosion thundered against the vault door, and the floor rumbled beneath her. Walls seemed to warp as cement dust rained down above her.

Xander fell on his face with a wet splash. She looked at him for a long while, then slowly to the vault door. It was like the vault room

exploded then put itself back together. She knew what had happened, but waited just the same, in case Scott had somehow found a way out. But deep down she knew it was impossible. He gave his life for the sake of humanity, and no one would ever know about it. The lives people led would continue, without a hitch, and they wouldn't ever know why.

She ripped some material off a Zed and wrapped it around her shoulder, using her teeth to tighten the tourniquet. It would have to do until she could get the bullet out. Claimed a handgun from the multitude of weapons strewn around the room.

A single tear rolled down her face. She bowed her head as the elevator doors closed, the curtain falling on the final act.

Maxine leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "What do you mean it's not my mission?"

Granthom shifted uneasily in his chair. "This might not be over," he said. "After Scott fulfills his mission, there may be another threat."

"What other threat? I thought this was it, this was everything we were working for."

He shook his head. "This might be Scott's story, but the next one will be yours."

In a sealed off annex within a subbasement deep underneath the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, an ancient terminal sprung to life. Beneath the dusty plastic covering, the cursor flashed on the screen. Ticking of components slowly warming echoed.

Letters emerged onto the screen, chasing the ever-moving cursor.
P. R. O. J.

Yellow words in Terminal font formed on the black screen.
PROJECT EVE... Initializing...

The cursor flipped in its spot, spinning like a baton twirling in a marching band.

Then...

Operational.

Epilogue

3 months later

Corrin Bells jogged along the sidewalk, dodging the peak hour people traffic. He wouldn't need to get into the office until noon, and so spent his mornings racking up a hasty ten-mile run around the city. His peers often joked that his body type didn't need to exercise, and he found this to be a true endeavor, always struggling to put on any fat. Yet, he always remarked that unless he did, he'd start looking his age. Given he had recently turned forty, he could feel his age starting to take its toll.

Gray clouds swept across the sky, pushing a sweet breeze across the concrete jungle. Pedestrians flashed by in a blur, raced to cover themselves from the biting cold, except for one. He saw her by the bridge in the park. Then again by the hotdog stand. Once more outside the theater. Figured his mind was playing tricks on him, that he needed to get out more.

Sweat covered the front and back of his black running top as he rounded a bend before the final stretch. Suddenly, a woman reading a newspaper appeared in front of him and he could do nothing but collide with her. Later, he would swear she wasn't there a split second before.

The pair tumbled to the sidewalk, however she somehow remained on her feet.

He stood immediately. "Oh my god, I'm sorry." He looked into her dazzling blue eyes, gazed over the messy short blonde hair. "Hey, do I know you? I've got to ask, but I'm sure I've seen you like four times already this morning on my run."

She pointed to her ears. "You're missing one."

He instinctively reached up, pulled out a wireless earbud. Started looking around the pavement. She lifted her foot, then looked up at him. Grimaced.

"Sorry," she said. "Let me make it up to you."

"It's okay. These things happen."

"Please," she said, reaching out. "I feel bad about all this. I wasn't even watching where I was going. Let me buy you a coffee. You're near the end of your run anyway, right?"

He cocked his head. "How did you know that?"

She shrugged. "Intuition."

He smiled. "What's your name?"

"Maxine," she replied.

Across the street, leaning against a light pole, Zev watched the scene unfold in front of him. He saw her at the bridge in the park. Watched her standing next to the hot dog stand. Observed her loitering outside the theater. He pulled out his phone and dialed a number.

"Report," she requested, plain yet almost electronic.

"Agent has contacted the target. What do you want us to do?"

"Enhance surveillance. I need to know what she knows."

He ended the call and slid the phone into his pocket. Pulled his beanie down over his ears and thrust his gloveless hands back into his coat pockets. To his knowledge, the agent was elusive and one that he needed to carefully deal with. She didn't look like much to him, but the orders were the orders, and he would follow them to the end. Whatever the purpose, whatever the outcome.

Zev took one last look at the target before disappearing into a sea of pedestrians.

Acknowledgements

This collection brings together the Identity Serial, the first episode of which—Identity—was my very first publication. I've learned a few things as the story progressed, and wanted to stay true to the original intent—a fast moving, binge readable adventure.

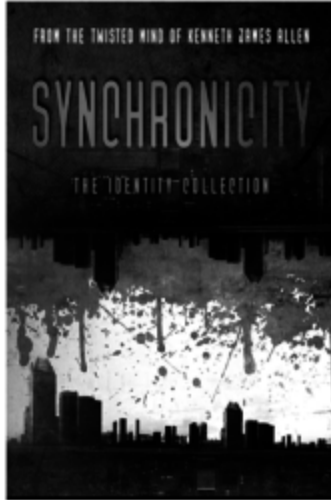
A big thank you to all the usual suspects involved in this little production, right through the entire serial. Rachel Haydon for your thoughts on everything from story to covers. Your guidance is amazing, and I appreciate every ounce of brain juice you offer.

Jerrica Mah for your feedback and editing prowess. Your notes and direction are always on point. Thanks for keeping me honest.

Until next time,

Kenneth James Allen

Please review this book!



Reviews really help me as an author, as well as sharing this book with more readers

[CLICK HERE TO REVIEW¹](https://www.amazon.com/review/create-review/?asin=B08NPNNPXQ)

1. <https://www.amazon.com/review/create-review/?asin=B08NPNNPXQ>

Want more twisted tales for free?



To say thanks for reading, I would like to give you a copy of **BROKEN**, a collection of flash fiction stories, for **FREE!**

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD²](#)

Or visit <https://kennethjamesallen.com/free-book/>

Finally, don't forget to leave a review and follow me on **Facebook³**

Or visit <https://www.facebook.com/kennethjamesallenauthor>

2. <https://kennethjamesallen.com/free-book/>

3. <https://www.facebook.com/kennethjamesallenauthor>

About the Author



I started writing in 2008, and after years of professional rejection, I started my self-publishing journey in 2020. I enjoy any story that keeps me guessing, hate contradiction, and fear spiders and hypodermic needles. Writing is my meditation. I became an Amazon best-selling author through my first two publications *IDENTITY* and *MACHINES*. When I'm not writing in Brisbane, I'm facilitating workshops, MCing conferences, and keynote speaking all over Australia.

Find out more at my website <https://kennethjamesallen.com/>

Don't forget to check out my other books

INCH



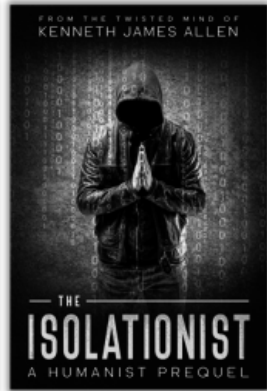
*The truth
could kill you*

The Humanist



The Steal
Dossier

The Isolationist



The Steal
Dossier

ZERO_1

Everyone has their breaking point. That point where they can't take it anymore, and they'll do just about anything for the pain to stop. The man, restrained to an uncomfortable chair in a sinister room, whimpered. He waited for the next hit, punch, snap or shock to wake him from his lassitude.

"When?" the prisoner mumbled. His voice wafted across the room like barbequed flesh. He said it in his native tongue, and to the only one of the three interrogators that understood his particular dialect.

Special Agent Durnham wiped his brow and then his mouth. It was uncomfortably hot, purposefully hot, but it was just another tactic in the bigger strategy. They had tried the lesser—less painful and less direct—forms, yet the prisoner held the truth in an unrelenting grip. But that, too, was loosening as the interrogation unfolded.

He rolled up his sleeves past his elbows, large sweat stains grew out from under his arms causing his dirty white shirt to become transparent. He straddled a chair and leaned in close, casting a looming shadow over the prisoner.

"Yes. When?" Durnham whispered. "Tell me when, and this can all be over." The words were right, but he forced the tone and enunciation, his accent as fake as the promise of the pain ending when he heard what he wanted to hear.

The prisoner whimpered again. He could make out the other two men standing in the back of the room near a door, the only door, engulfed in the obscurities and engaged in a quiet conversation as they sucked back cigarettes and leaned on the zapping machine, the one they would roll over when he could feel himself being sucked under the current of death. He would hear a high-pitched whine and a hot spark of electricity would course through him, forcing him to

tense against his bonds, and both revive him and wear him down at the same time.

“When?” Durnham pleaded. “I can help you, but you have to tell me when.”

A whimper was all the prisoner could manage through his broken jaw. This experience is not how he envisioned it, not how ‘*they*’ explained it to him. The two men that visited him at his home spoke perfect dialect and looked like locals. They said they represented The Ghost, the name itself, causing a shiver to run the man’s spine. As mysterious as he was dangerous. He wasn’t someone to cross, even though no one had ever seen the man.

The men promised him and his family everything—freedom, safety, even riches. He merely had to name his compensation. And so he did. The price he would pay was great, but the rewards for his family were even greater. Then he had hurriedly signed the contract, not bothering to read the mountainous wad of paper they had presented to him.

He was to be a martyr, and his family would be well rewarded for it. All he had to do was pass on the information, but not too easily. He had to drip-feed it, make it legitimate. If he were too forthcoming, the information would be disregarded. They must believe it. *They must believe me.* Therefore, he needed them to force it from him. He had let them know the *who* and the *what* and the *where*. Now they needed one more piece of information to bring it all together. Which was good, because he only had one more piece of information to tell them.

Through the pain, the intense pain, the layer upon layer of agony, he resisted the temptation to blurt it all out. Just when the pain eased, another wave of aching broke over him like a wave crashing over his fragile body, the screams muffled by pungent rags, a fight against the restraints.

He was not who they thought he was. He was not a terrorist, not even a freedom fighter. He was a shepherd who tended to his flock for fourteen hours a day. He was no one, a nobody. He possessed no other information than what they provided to him by his two visitors. He was the middleman, the messenger.

“Allah, peace be with him, will be overjoyed,” the two men had told him. “And while you live in his sanctuary, your family will live like kings on earth, until you are all reunited and live forever in peace.”

That promise seemed like a lifetime ago, as now he sat in his underwear amongst his own excrement. Fingers were missing from both hands while other digits were bent at extraordinary angles. A man in a white coat, a doctor by any other name, had used some metallic device to remove his right eye, and it now rested on his cheek, the optic nerve still connected into the socket. His vision was split into two with his right field forever staring at the screwdriver that was protruding from his right thigh. His left eye encrusted with tears.

He took quick breaths, his life hanging on by a thread. Wanted it all to be over. Needed it all to be over. He had played his part, achieved what he had signed up for. Now was the time for him to say it.

“When?” Durnham implored. “Tell me when and we can fix up all this shit in the best hospital money can buy. We can move your family out of the country. We will protect them.”

They were already protected, he believed, protected by powers beyond theirs. Perhaps if he knew his pregnant wife and son were both dead, he would have delivered a very different performance. But how could he know that? They were taken from this earth the day after he shuffled near the DMZ with his arms raised, recounting the Quran in his native tongue, and displaying a vest packed with explosives. More than enough to gain and hold their attention.

Oh my, how they panicked. Many men with their machine guns remained at a safe distance until others arrived in their heavy suits to deactivate the bomb. He then laid on the ground until they bound him, placed a sack over his head, and bundled him into a Humvee.

“The Ghost,” he repeated in his native tongue. “The Ghost.”

Another time he would have thought back and laughed at the efforts given to such a simple person with nothing much to say. He was simply the messenger. However, this was not another time and agony crashed over his body, bringing death closer with each passing moment.

“Three days,” he wheezed through his locked jaw, his dry tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth.

Durnham echoed it back to him and the prisoner nodded slightly, despite the anguish.

There. He had done it, and now it could all be over. *Please let this be over.*

Durnham stood, his mouth curling at the edges, the chair scraping loudly on the concrete. The time and effort had finally paid off. It was always like this. You place enough pressure on a man and he would say or do anything. He acutely knew of false information and was selective in what he asked and how he asked the detainee.

“Kill me,” the captive man rasped. “Kill me.” He resigned to his fate and was ready to die, ready to be accepted into heaven. He was ready to be a sacrifice for his family.

Durnham ignored the request and walked over to the other two agents. He relayed the critical information obtained from the prisoner. The hushed conversation quickly grew into a moral argument, with all three men stating their perspectives with pointed fingers and harsh words. Durnham drew his pistol from his holster and held it against his leg as they continued to vehemently debate the next move. The unofficial dialogue ended abruptly when the other two

men exited through the door, leaving Durnham staring at the floor and contemplating his next move.

He turned slowly and approached the prisoner.

“Kill me,” the man hushed again. “Please.” He did his best to make the request, given he could only create the words with his tongue, but he knew the agent understood.

Durnham chewed his lip as he stood in front of the mess of a man. “I want to,” he said, his voice clean and crisp, unwavering. He pointed the gun at the prisoner’s forehead. “I really do.”

Then Durnham replaced the gun in his holster and bent out of view.

“Kill me,” the gasp came again.

“Yeah,” Durnham said, “I know.”

Durnham pulled a black sack over his head.

“No!” The prisoner moaned. “Kill me!”

He wailed as he watched through the gaps in the thread. The man walked to the open door and paused. An outstretched arm flicked a switch and then darkness fell upon him. The bang of the closing door echoed through him and he was alone.

Alone in the darkness.

Alone with his suffering.

Longing for the death he was so eagerly promised, yet was not forthcoming.

ZERO_2

Eyelid snapped open. A gasp.

Sunlight streamed in through the window, cutting through the thick air, warming the room. James Worthy's world was off kilter, and he pushed himself to roll over and open the other eye. Two versions of the room floated of their own accord before coming together in a single image, the lines merging to make solid shapes.

Somewhere in the distance, a phone rang, but he couldn't place the source. His phone had ceased to ring a long time ago. It's true what they say, that you find out whom your genuine friends are when you lose everything. Turns out he didn't have any. They checked in at first, but soon the calls decreased in number and regularity as his attitude labored out of control and his drinking increased.

He was at peace with that, though. He didn't need them as much as they didn't need him, and it sat well with his conscience. He'd been a loner for longer than he hadn't been and was the reason he chose the profession he had endured for all those years.

Somewhere in the depths of the house, the tone of the answering machine sounded.

"Mr. Worthy, this is Christine Raziel. I haven't heard from you and would love to reconnect. As I said, Doctor Gabriel is keen to continue his conversation with you. You know my details. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

Fuck. Christine Raziel. The military-appointed psych to "help with transitioning" into "non-military life"... or some bullshit like that. But one session was enough, more than enough.

He shifted his gaze to the bedside table and reached for his watch, contacting it on his third attempt. It was well after ten and he cursed himself for not closing the blinds and disconnecting the phone before he passed out the night before.

He clenched his eyes shut and willed himself up, praying for energy. The world spun, and it felt like someone was stabbing a knife through his brain. Not fast and piercing, but slow and deliberate, making sure every ounce of pain was as heavy as a brick. He reached up to this head just in case he had an object protruding from his temple.

He felt along his brow, his fingers tracing along the raised scar that ran across his forehead, and winced. His hand fell to the left side of his face, to the mottled skin of a burn long since healed. They were permanent reminders of his past, like tattoos, and ones he could never cover up. He guessed, given the circumstances, that he should consider himself lucky. He knew of some that had lost body parts, others had lost their minds. The least fortunate had lost their lives.

The previous night's events were hazy and he wouldn't have put it past him to jam something into his grey matter to end it all. Sure, there would have been easier ways, but he wasn't into the easy ways of doing things. He would rather suffer, feel every inch of pain before life evacuated his body, and he'd savor every moment, like cheap whiskey that burned your throat on the way down.

He noticed, however, that he disrobed before passing out on the unmade, king-size mattress. As he sat in his underwear, he located a trail of clothes from the doorway to the bed. His gut gurgled, and he grabbed at it. Lost memories. He couldn't remember the last time he ate anything of substance. Alcohol was one of his top food groups, being right up there with prescription medication. And together, well, the result being the shabby mess sitting on the edge of the bed catching a foggy glance at himself in the wardrobe mirror.

Images of the night's dream flashed before him. He was floating, lifted from the earth into the clouds and felt as light as free-falling from five thousand feet. Then a hand appeared from below, grabbed his leg and yanked him down. He came crashing to earth with such a jolt it woke him. Maybe he was having a heart attack or a

stroke—maybe he was dead. His head swayed from side to side, aware that any sudden movement would be both difficult and painful.

He eased down onto the floor with a groan and moved into a push-up position. He stared at the floor, inspecting each microfiber thread, examining the dust and other crap that built up over time. The floor rushed towards him and he lay for a moment, his bare chest on the floor, the sun warming his back. Then he pushed. Again and again.

After counting out fifty repetitions, he lowered himself halfway and held the position. Punishment. It was punishment for the previous night, for the things he said, for the things he did, for the things he thought. Although being out of the shape a professional military man should have, he held the position for two minutes. Then his arms shook, and he grimaced, inviting the pain. Penalty, for not having the guts to go through with it and end it all.

When he couldn't hold it any longer and his grunts and groans were getting on his own nerves, he released the tension and flopped to the floor, soaking up the returned silence. His stomach gurgled again. He could feel something moving inside, working its way out. All the head, arm and stomach pain stripped away in seconds as he pulled himself up and moved to the ensuite, bouncing off the wall as he did so.

Having emptied his stomach's contents several times over and then some, he found a pair of shorts. It took several attempts to get them on.

He stood in the hallway outside his bedroom door, scratching his stomach. He remembered when he had a six pack, from when he reveled in keeping fit. That was a long time ago though, and now he was just living. No, now he was just surviving. Living implies a certain quality of life.

He turned his head to the left and looked down the hallway of closed doors. Why did he continue to torture himself? He could have sold the damn house seven times over already, yet deep down he knew he couldn't. Too many memories, good and bad, which meant the house was an anchor around his feet. This was both a blessing and a curse, both holding him and repelling him at the same time.

He took a deep breath, turned to the stairs, and padded down to the kitchen, on the lookout for anything that would fill the void in his stomach. He knew his chances of actually finding something was slim, but he was hoping to locate a long-lost can of something hidden deep in the pantry.

Several beer and whiskey bottles lined the sink, with blister packs littering the island countertop. He stood between the messes and admired his efforts, being both proud and disgusted with himself. He hated what he had turned into, who he allowed himself to be. It was so gradual that this disgrace was the new normal. He ran a hand over his facial growth and wondered how much more he would have to take before he didn't have to wake up anymore.

A muffled ringing sound snaked through the morning noise, quiet at first and then picking up the tempo and volume, followed by a dull vibration. Worthy instinctively grabbed the home phone. Silence greeted him, the display dead, confusion reigned. The mild noise, a cacophony in Worthy's head, continued to invade his auditory senses with as much impact as a truck, as he turned his attention to the kitchen table and upturned the contents. Worthy threw magazines, bills, and unopened envelopes in all directions until he found his mobile phone hiding under a stack of junk mail.

He cleared his throat a few times before pressing the screen to accept the call.

"Worthy," he croaked out. He supposed he could have done better to welcome the caller. Perhaps a "hello" or "This is James", but let's face it, the phone call was ruining his post-bender recovery.

The response was swift, sweet and soothing. “Mr. James Worthy, please hold the line while I connect you.” Her voice rendered him incapable of movement. It felt like just the right amount of sultry, and he imagined a busty assistant with a low-cut top and stockings. He then pictured this complete figment of his imagination, naked and bent over a desk. He gripped the countertop for support.

A voice crackled on the line. “Mr. Worthy, I trust I’m not interrupting anything.” The voice belonged to an older gentleman, his diction perfect yet still conveyed a gravelly edge to it, all the while managing to sooth the rock that was rolling back and forth in Worthy’s skull.

The interruption washed away his fantasy. Without knowing who he was talking to, he looked around the empty room and responded.

“Not at all,” he lied. “How can I help you?”

“We have an opening and feel you are suitable for the role.”

The announcement dumfounded Worthy. He hadn’t worked in, well, he wasn’t sure how long. Once the media threw accusations and plastered his face on television, no one came looking for his special set of skills, regardless of how well the country had utilized them in the past.

He circumnavigated the table, sifting through the contents to find a pen and paper.

“Well, that sounds great,” he replied slowly, followed by a fumbling of words as he tried to recollect the last position of a pen. This was all so much easier in the old days. “And, who is this for again?”

“My apologies, Mr. Worthy. Call me Barnaby. We’ll discuss the details when you arrive at ten o’clock this morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” Worthy said, now opening drawers to find the missing writing implements. “Wait,” he said as he shut the drawer. “It’s already after ten here. What time zone are you calling from?”

“Time,” the gentleman retorted jovially. “There’s always time, particularly for a conversation such as ours. Besides, it’s just after eight.”

“Maybe where you are,” Worthy said, and then stopped when he saw the time on his watch. He squeezed his eyes and double checked the position of the hands. He then checked the oven, microwave, and wall clock. Each displayed the identical eight-fifteen time.

Worthy discharged a long droning noise before apologizing.

“No need to apologize, Mr. Worthy. It is a common mistake.”

“I appreciate that. Where is your office?”

“No office as such, however, we have organized a room for us to meet and discuss the finer details of our requirements. A device will arrive for you shortly with details of the location.”

“I see,” Worthy said. Skepticism coated his response.

“I’m sure you can appreciate, Mr. Worthy, that a conversation such as ours comes with a certain level of, shall we say, discretion?”

“Discretion? Of course.”

“Very good. If you can bring the device to our conversation, then we are off to a very good start indeed.”

Worthy shrugged his shoulders, thinking of the ease of the task. “Looking forward to it.”

There was a knock at the front door, followed by a chime of the doorbell that Worthy felt should have caused more audible damage than it did.

“I see the package has arrived,” Barnaby said. “I must go now, as must you; however, I am very much looking forward to our paths crossing again very soon. Now I must attend to my assistant. By the way, her name is Angel, which is ironic really, don’t you think?”

Worthy pressed the phone harder to his ear. “Sorry?”

The whispered reply cut through him. “Because she’s a demon in the sack.”

Worthy was speechless as he envisioned the older man, his saggy body pounding wildly against Angel's bare ass, the Viagra providing unlimited stamina, driving her to a chain of flamboyant orgasms.

Another knock at the door woke him from his fantastical nightmare.

"Good day, Mr. Worthy." The phone went silent.

Worthy looked down at the black screen and tossed it amongst the rubbish on the counter. It must have died just as the call concluded. Worthy saw it as a rather fortunate event.

As he walked towards the door, all he could think of was what he would say to Angel when he met her later that morning. Something clever like "I know you're fucking the boss" or "how does it feel when he drains his saggy balls into you?". He shook his head, trying to eliminate all thoughts of Angel and old men, as he opened the door.

True enough, a delivery driver stood there in his crisp uniform and cap, a small package in one hand and a small device in the other. The courier tipped his cap and greeted the customer. Worthy skipped the pleasantries and pressed his thumb against the device. The courier handed over the package and Worthy once more ignored the farewell, his total attention on the box.

After slamming the front door, he made his way back to the lounge, holding the package up to his ear as he shook it. No noise came forth. It was then he realized how good he felt, despite feeling like a wet dumpster not too long ago. His stomach wasn't churning and his head wasn't banging.

A few minutes later, he eased down on the couch with a cup of coffee. He was surrounded by the previous contents of the coffee table, that he had unceremoniously pushed onto the floor to make room for the package which was now front and center, staring back at him. He eyed it, uncertain of what to do.

Someone knew his name. Someone who went to the trouble of sending a package and having an intermediary make the call, a.k.a.: Busty Angel. Barnaby gave him a time to meet, but not the place. Why? Perhaps government? Covert organization? Well-financed hate group? The more he thought about it, the more he felt the needle rising on his brain's Richter scale.

He winced as the pain and thumping in his head grew stronger. The pain had returned, stronger and harder than before. At a loss for what else to do, he took a sip of coffee, cleared his throat, and maneuvered the package until it rested in front of him. Touching the box caused his pain to retreat, the echoing thumps receding into the distance, replaced with a thick, smothering mental gel that deadened all of his senses.

His arms felt light, like they were moving of their own free will, pulling apart the package like a kid unwrapping a gift on Christmas morning. He mused at the watery cocoon he felt he was in, a level of intoxication that lifted his soul and caused him to move in large sweeping motions. The feeling differed greatly from the cocktail of alcohol and prescription meds the night before, where all he wanted to do was jam a bread knife into his stomach and cogitate over the act.

He collapsed back onto the couch, cradling the black, sleek device. He turned it over in his hands, but he couldn't find any button to turn it on, nor could he distinguish the front from the back. It looked like a solid piece of black glass.

"Well, now what?" he mumbled.

The device vibrated. Worthy turned it over to reveal a message on the screen.

