

# SHADES

## THE GEHENNA DILEMMA

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# CHAPTER 1

## Funerary Rights

>> DATE: Sept. 22nd, 2039. Three days before present time.

>> TIME: 3:21 AM.

>> LOCATION: Atchafalaya Basin, Louisiana.

“A perfect night for your grave deeds, sir,” Sasha whispered to me. Her cutting tone indicated a newfound grasp of sarcasm that made me smirk. Now all of the women in my life disapproved of my work, even the artificial one. My partner Spenner coaxed more speed from his black sedan to make up time. Tires screeched, and the engine's roar sent a hidden rookery of white herons soaring. The vehicle's climate subsystem beeped an alert about the hot Louisiana evening air rushing in through the passenger side. I ignored it and left my window open. Smells of fresh rain and dank earth filled my nose. I preferred keeping all of my senses active while on the hunt. We barreled down a narrow road, riding over the encroaching tendrils and fingers of the Atchafalaya swamp. I watched the passing shadow play of silhouettes from black marsh trees performing their twisted dance. Out of the murky air, a metal sign rushed to meet us, but red rust covered its words and population numbers. Peering ahead, I saw fresh tire tracks in the muddy road, so I motioned for Spenner to pull over. He slammed the brakes hard, and we skidded to a stop next to the only gas pump.

The sound of our arrival roused the station's elderly attendant. We exited the car to question him about our target: a truck registered to the Devereux family. He peered at us through brass glasses, the thick lenses magnifying blue eyes that twinkled a shade darker than my own.

“We're looking for an old 2020 green truck,” I asked the old man. “Did it pass by here recently?” The attendant shook his head and shrugged with a suspicious quickness. I wondered why he had just suffered an acute case of memory loss.

“Buy some fuel or move along, blondie,” he snarled at me.

With a scowl and his fists balled, Spenner stepped up with the intention of pummeling the truth out of him. I intervened before my rash partner acted. Out of my leather jacket I withdrew a small wad of cash. Widened eyes told me the man had a price. After we handed him a few bills, the man remembered a wealth of interesting information.

“I jus' serviced that truck an hour ago,” he mumbled. “It had a big wooden box sticking out the back. They had about ten or eleven cars with 'em. Just like one of them ole time funeral processions. Some of 'em bought soda pop. Then they left.” He motioned with his thumb, pointing outside. “They headed down the south road.”

“You've been a big help,” I replied, handing him a smaller stack of bills.

“Remember, we weren't here.” The attendant nodded and counted his money with a smile that revealed neglect and a chronic pipe-smoking habit.

Time ticked against us, so we hurried back to the car and got in. The Devereux family aimed to put that box in the ground. But they no longer owned its contents -- and that's why Spenner and I slogged through this god-forsaken marsh. Our car roared and peeled away from the gas station. We followed the trail of fresh tire tracks into a dense wooded path that could not be classified as a road, even by rural standards. After twenty minutes of blind search, we came to an overgrown thicket that engulfed all traces of the road. We rolled without a sound over the last of the winding dirt road before the black swamp ahead swallowed the vehicle whole. We slowed, and I spotted a line of parked cars, vans, and a chrome-covered aero-bike.

"There they are," I whispered to my partner. "Park ahead of them."

With a wave of his calloused hand, Spenner killed the car's headlights. Leafy branches parted and embraced our car to provide perfect concealment. As we parked, I tapped my wrist-com to review the dossiers of the Devereux clan one last time. I flicked through the photos of the family, my eyes scanning through the thick files for anything I missed. My ears listened to mission intelligence relayed by my other, secret partner.

"Jonah, no one in the Devereux family has any registered firearms or prior convictions," spoke Sasha into the microscopic receiver implanted in my right ear. She served as my resident artificial intelligence program, embedded within my specially created wrist-com. Her assistance came in handy for these kinds of missions. I felt Spenner's piercing green eyes on me as Sasha talked. I wondered if he had some preternatural sense to hear her presence. My instinct told me not to divulge her existence to a new partner. I stared straight ahead and didn't respond. Satisfied with my preparation, I shut off the wrist-com and opened the car door. My body started sweating from the bayou's night heat.

The two of us exited the car without a sound and headed for the car's rear. Spenner opened the trunk to reveal his armory, bathing our faces in a white electric glow. The trunk's light made his scar more prominent among the natural crags and lines on his face. The old wound traced a thin trail through the brown and gray hair near his temple. It appeared and faded like the ghost of a bullet from some past lethal encounter.

Damn. He had enough illegal military weaponry, stun-rods, and neural-paralytics to equip a small army. Expecting no resistance from the family, I opted for an easy-to-conceal tranquilizer gun and a stun-rod. Those choices prompted a contemptuous snort from my partner.

"If you're going to pack light, I'll pick up the slack," chided Spenner. He grabbed the double-barreled scattershot rifle, a sonic squealer modified with an illegal amplifier, and four cryo-grenades.

"Jesus, are we hunting a stiff or going to war?" I didn't bother to conceal my concern. "My research says this family is unarmed. It's an easy collection."

"If these families want to act like criminals, I'll treat them like criminals," he growled. "You want to make sure we get paid, right? My intel says your mother could really use that money."

I froze. Spenner had done his homework. Of course, I'd checked him out too. But it unsettled me that he knew more intimate details. My sources told me only the basics about him. Like me, he'd taken bounty jobs after the military served him with

a discharge. He had a reputation for getting results, but his outcomes turned bloody. When I accepted the job two days back, I had ignored my instinctual warnings about him, passing other lower paying hacking gigs. Like he said, I needed the money. Too late for regret, I told myself. After this, my gut told me, I needed a new partner. For now, I focused on the mission.

“If the target is damaged, we don't get the bounty,” I warned. I didn't want to let this hothead take charge. “We go in my way or not at all.”

Spenner grinned back. “You'll need these,” he answered, tossing me a pair of noise-reducing earplugs to ward against the squealer's effects. Then he turned away and started toward the swamp. “I want you to be able to hear me say ‘I told you so’ later.” I put them on and followed.

Together, we crept into the swamp through fetid water, with only the buzzing choir of insects scattering to herald our approach. Looking up, I saw intermittent shafts of moonlight pierce through the treetop canopy. Our tall frames required frequent ducking beneath the five-foot-high tangles of claw-like tree branches. I tapped my wrist-com for occasional illumination and to query Sasha for updates.

“I hacked into a military satellite and downloaded its surveillance photos of this region,” reported Sasha. “Its thermal imaging shows a count of fourteen people one hundred yards away. I'm unable to discern what they are doing, but I calculate the odds that they are planning a surprise party for you to be infinitesimally low.” I cracked a thin smile, pleased that Sasha's ever-maturing personality sub-routines desired to cheer me up.

“The latest geo-satellite uplink shows fourteen ahead,” I whispered aloud.

“Looks like the whole clan showed up for the service,” he responded. “Good thing I came prepared.” I extended my middle finger behind his back as a silent response.

Pushing through the foliage quicker, we smelled burning pine. Then we saw the telltale floating embers of multiple torches. When we reached the clearing, we found the family stacking fresh-cut logs onto a pile. I guessed they meant to use the wood as a funeral pyre. Lucky for us, the pyre remained unlit. We still had a chance, so we stepped up the pace of our approach.

Moving closer, we heard a hushed, deep voice speaking in an ancient but familiar tongue. We crouched behind a large moss-covered rock and surveyed the clearing ahead. A family of fourteen knelt, stood, and sobbed before a simple black casket bearing the body of their withered patriarch.

A tall robed man stood over the casket, speaking Latin. A priest performing the final rites of passage, I guessed. His weathered face featured a shaggy gray beard that hung like a clump of old moss, and his drab brown robes blended so well with the surroundings that he looked like a natural part of the forest.

“Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto,” spoke the priest in a deep voice that reverberated around the wood. “Cinis ad cinerem, pulvis ad pulverem.”

I didn't understand everything the preacher said, but at some point I'm fairly certain he said 'ashes to ashes', meaning he neared an end to his prayer. Spenner crouched and thrust the squealer's barrel through the middle of the bush concealing us. He placed his finger on the trigger and aimed his rifle. When I realized that he intended to shoot first and sort it out later, I placed my hand on his gun. Without

saying a word, I locked eyes on him and shook my head as if to say we have to do this my way. In that tense moment, I felt him sizing me up. His face became an unreadable wall of stoic granite. At six-foot-four, Spenner possessed an imposing four-inch height advantage and thicker muscles than my leaner frame. Holding my ground, I waited to see if he would fire anyway or even turn his fury on me. After a few moments of consideration, Spenner nodded and lowered the weapon. While I knew these collections sometimes ended in conflict, I needed to give the family the chance to surrender. I made a countdown motion for Spenner to enter the clearing ahead. On the count of three, Spenner emerged first from our cover, double-armed with his scattergun in his left hand and squealer in the other.

“Everybody freeze! NOW!” Spenner's piercing, primal challenge shattered the serenity of the area, and the swamp erupted in chaos. A quartet of resting egrets flapped their wings to escape from the noisy predator. A trio of mangy river rats squealed from the nearby bush and scurried away. The fourteen Devereux family members jumped, cried out, gasped, and shouted obscenities at my partner. Then I emerged from hiding to present the formalities and rights.

“Everyone be calm!” I shouted, holding a glowing blue holo-sphere over my head. “We are lawfully deputized federal agents here to collect the deceased remains of Jebediah Devereux.” The sphere possessed a portable virtual-casting generator inside of it. Since the v-cast machine only contained a simple portable mark-1 generator, the holograms it projected lacked high fidelity but looked real enough to an unsophisticated eye. Upon activation, the holo-sphere floated out of my hand and whined to life. Multi-colored shafts of lights from the sphere brightened the dark swamp. The sphere created flickering deputy IRS silver badges for Spenner and me, appearing over our jackets. Next, the sphere cast a cone of light particles that rearranged into the distorted visage of a human face. More color shot from the sphere, and the quality of the hologram increased. The sphere then transformed itself into the wrinkled face of the Honorable Judge Rutherford Prescott.

“Pursuant to United States Code, Title 26, Subtitle Z, Section 25158 (1) (a), the Incorporeal Revenue Service has been given the mandate to collect debts from citizens who perish in a state of serious delinquency and insolvency...” the ghost judge stated, droning on longer with more legal disclaimers.

“Shit!” yelled the largest of the family members. From what I recalled of the intel on the Devereux clan, they nicknamed this massive tank of a young man Little Scooter. “They're ghouls!”

All of the others started to protest at the same time. Three of the women wailed and pleaded with us to go away to let them proceed with the services. Rising tall above everyone, the priest demanded that we depart, his voice cracking with anger. He argued something about 'sanctified grounds', but I couldn't hear him over the din of protestations. Besides, our legal mandate superseded the ecclesiastic when it came to this kind of collection. Over the chaos, the holographically-projected judge continued to read the lien and rights. Spenner powered his rifle and pointed its glowing barrel at the Devereux clan.

“How dare you!” yelled a short, elderly woman. I remembered her face from my digital dossiers. Sherry, the target's wife, fumed bright red with anger and indignation. Her small frame trembled with fury. “This was a God-fearing man who

deserves a proper burial! He was the mayor for Christ's sake!"

Scooter's mop of dirty blond hair covered his brow, but I could see his face twist into a withering scowl. He bent down to pick up an axe that he must have used earlier to cut and build the wooden pyre. I knew Spenner saw this, because he swiveled his guns towards the hulking youth.

"Bad idea, chubby," Spenner warned. "I will not hesitate to brain you so hard that you'll be serving your own life-debt with your gramps. That goes for all of you hillbillies. Interfere and you'll pay the same price."

"...the appeal process, pursuant to United States Code, Title 27, Subtitle Z, Section 21153 (2) (c), can be initiated at any local court should you elect to do so," the holo-judge continued.

No one moved or spoke while the judge read the rights. With every tick of the tension-laden moments, time slowed more and more. The Devereux clan glared at us with pure concentrated venom. The hairs on my arms raised, and I could hear Spenner's finger cock the trigger mechanism of his scattergun.

My mind raced to say something that didn't sound threatening or contrived that might defuse the deteriorating situation.

"Listen everyone, if we can all remain calm--" I stopped when I saw the old lady glance to each side, her hands balling. She readied herself. I tried to scream 'NO', but it all went to hell before that second got to tick. She broke the stand off by grabbing one of the torches lighting the area, and sprinted toward the pyre with swiftness that belied her petite body. A tinge of guilt knotted my stomach. Part of me couldn't blame her; she wanted to lay her beloved husband to rest.

Spenner flashed a twisted, vicious smile. I knew he wanted a fight. With a flick of his finger, he fired the scattergun. A signature yellow pulse distorted the air around the weapon's barrel, and slammed Sherry with a non-lethal but painful concussive force. The poor woman, a seventy-five-year-old grandmother, gasped as the blast took the air from her lungs, broke her ribs, and knocked her to the ground.

Scooter's frothing mouth uttered some unintelligible curse as he hefted the axe over his head. Like a full-grown bull with horns bared, Scooter let out a roar and charged us. Unfazed, Spenner readied and fired his other weapon, the terrible squealer. The crimson-glowing rifle emitted a cone of sonic force at the whole crowd. It unleashed a piercing sound that no living being should have to hear, like the amplified sound of an animal dying in pain. Scooter and his family collapsed, covering their bleeding ears, screaming the dreadful squeal of pain that gave the weapon its namesake.

With the crowd controlled, I moved toward the deceased body of the target with only the priest standing in my way. Despite blood trickling from his ears, he stood stoic and oblivious to the pain, and remained intent on his work. He mouthed a prayer and made a gesture of the trinity. I lowered my guard too soon, because right around the cross-shaped gesture for the Holy Ghost, his hand slipped into his robe and he pulled out a Magnum hand cannon.

I had time to curse "Damn" aloud, then I apologized in my mind for swearing in front of a clergyman. As I twirled to avoid his first shot, I swung my stun-rod down onto his shoulder. The stun-rod made a muted zapping sound and gave off an acrid burning smell from the electrical attack. With his muscles contracted, he groaned

and dropped his gun. Knowing this bear of a priest still presented a threat, I lunged for the coup-de-grace and stuck the sparking end of the weapon dead-center at his chest, sending fifty thousand volts of stunning electricity through his crucifix and into his writhing body.

“Forgive me father, for I have sinned,” I joked. In that moment, I worried if Hell waited for striking the priest or for telling that joke. But the priest did draw first. At least, that's how I consoled myself.

“I’ve got the family pinned, do you have the stiff?” Spenner called out over the cries of pain. He brandished the squealer rifle as the Devereux family members, most still trembling and clutching their ears, crawled away from him.

“Yeah, I got it,” I yelled back. Opening my backpack, I pulled out a long syringe and popped off its protective cap. The transparent tube bubbled with a noxious-looking yellow fluid, a serum formulated and programmed for Jebediah. Looking up, I addressed the transparent, virtual face of the judge. “Your Honor, the defendant is ready for sentencing.”

“..Jebediah Devereux,” announced the judge, “you have been sentenced to serve a post-mortem service to repay your after-debt to society. Your soulless body will be rejuvenated to work for a service term of no less than seventy-five years.”

With the sentence announced, I plunged the syringe into the chest of the deceased man before me, and braced myself for something I never enjoyed seeing. All of the family stopped wailing and glared at me with hate, then looked to the body with sadness. We all waited for the inevitable. A muscle convulsion shook the dead body once, then twice, and the third made the body rise from the unlit pyre. It was now a shell of what the man used to be, a soulless commodity belonging to the stiff's debtor.

A shade.

When it looked at me with eyes blazing with a yellow-tinged hue, I knew that the juice had done its work. The serum coursed through the dead body, bringing it back, programming it to key into our voices and obey without hesitation. Jebediah, a former father of seven children, grandfather to fifteen, an honest but unlucky businessman, now became a lumbering, animated husk. As a mindless shade, he would toil for three quarters of a century somewhere on Earth, or possibly on the moon, wherever he fetched a higher bid, until he satisfied his afterdeath financial obligations.

“Let's go, Jebediah, it's time for you to start your first shift,” Spenner announced without a modicum of pity. The Devereux family members, beaten and bloodied, mustered enough saliva to spit at us as we departed with our bounty.

# CHAPTER 2

## The Sickle and the Cross

*“But in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”*

- Benjamin Franklin, 1777

>> DATE: Sept. 25th, 2039, the present time. Three days after the Jebediah bounty mission.

>> TIME: Unknown.

>> LOCATION: Incorporeal Revenue Service, New York City Branch, Building D.

The sweeping view of black space, rocketing shuttles, and the blue-gray Earth from floor ten thousand of the Lunar Spire paled in my mind to Vanessa’s radiant glory. Despite overlooking the most coveted table with a stellar view at La Vie, she captured all of my attention. Her cream-colored dress glittered with diamonds, bright stars shining and orbiting around her like a private galaxy. She smiled at me, and lifted her champagne-filled glass to mine. When her lips parted, my cheeks flushed and my heart pounded.

“I love you, Vanessa,” I whispered, touching her glass with a crystal kiss. I motioned for her to sit so we could start our ten-course meal at the moon’s most exclusive restaurant. Deep down, I understood this to be a dream, but in that moment I didn’t care.

“I love you too, Jonah,” she said, reaching out to hold my hand. Before we touched, the Earth, the restaurant, our table, and then Vanessa all melted away like pictures in a fire. My subconscious struggled to hold this hopeful fantasy-to-be together just a while longer. Despite my effort, everything faded into darkness, followed by a visual deluge of memories from the last three days. I saw a staccato slideshow of images. It started with Jebediah the shade lumbering behind me. Then the scene shifted to Spenner driving his car back to New York, followed by an explosion alongside a dark highway. The dreamscape changed into a digital advertisement featuring a man in a white suit waving to get my attention. The vision ended with a view of the High Tower meta-skyscraper dominating the skyline of New York. All of these confusing, disconnected thoughts flooded my mind’s eye at once. As I tried to make sense of the chaos, a loud sound disrupted my dreaming.

“Jonah,” sounded another voice that did not belong to Vanessa. That voice and the throbbing pain on the sides of my head awakened me from sleep. My heart quickened when I struggled to remember how I managed to get from the swamp to this cold, spartan room. When I raised my head, I felt an ache down my spine. My eyes fluttered, trying to refresh my blurry vision. After a few more blinks and rubbing my eyes, my sight adjusted to the room’s harsh lighting. The interrogation room could have been plucked right from an old television cop show. Sterile white

walls boxed me into a fifteen-by-fifteen room. Stale, cold air flowed through a grated ceiling vent. Along the room's far side, a smoke-colored glass wall allowed my captors to watch me but not the other way around. The claustrophobic space heightened my anxiety.

To calm myself, I reviewed what I knew. First, my body ached all over. Judging from the bruises and aching jaw, my body had taken part in one hell of a fight. Coarse blond and scattered gray stubble on my face hinted I had been here a day or more. A quick check of my faded jeans revealed emptied pockets. Beneath the arms of my well-worn dark blue jacket, I felt the telltale bumps from a pair of needle punctures. I wondered if my captors had administered medicine or some drug to enhance the integrity of my answers. Second, I remembered answering questions an hour ago from a pair of disembodied voices. Behind the opaque glass window, they had asked detailed queries about me, the Devereux family, my girlfriend Vanessa, and Spenner. They had repeated the questions a second time with the gentle approach. When they'd drilled the same questions with the tough approach, I'd gotten lightheaded and passed out on the hard steel table. Third, they'd confiscated my wrist-com and my access to Sasha. If they wanted her code, they would have a hard time unspooling her security protections. I found the silence of her absence unsettling. Before I started to review my escape strategies, the door opened, and two men entered the room. The first one, a taller, thinner man dressed in a silver suit, spoke first.

"I hope you are feeling better after your rest," he said with a soft, musical voice. "We now have enough information about the collection mission for Jebediah Devereux. We would appreciate it if you would continue with the next stage of your report."

Then the second interrogator, a well-muscled African-American man in a custom-fitted designer black suit, walked to the table and grabbed the seat across from me. With a purposeful aggressive motion, he dragged the chair so it grated against the floor. His stocky, muscular body moved with a purposeful lack of subtlety. When he fell into his seat, his fast-descending weight created a thud, and his hands slammed the table to steady himself. So, this one will play the part of the hard-ass, I thought.

"Where am I?" I demanded. "Do you have Vanessa?"

"We'll answer your questions after you answer a few of our own," replied the interrogator. He rubbed his thick, groomed mustache, then tapped at the data window before him to recall information about me. "You stated that after you procured the target, you and your partner Spenner returned to the city?"

Seeking any advantage, I paused before answering to study him and glean even the most minuscule detail. At six-foot-five, he still loomed over me even while sitting. His stern brown-eyed gaze met mine but revealed nothing. When he folded his massive hands, I noticed many white scars and calluses. Shifting in his chair, he seemed to wear his expensive suit with disdain, like a formality he observed but disliked. Instinct informed me that this large man felt more comfortable in the field than in a government office. His suit's sleeve slipped down just enough for me to notice the top portion of his colorful tattoo, the toothy maw of a green Chinese dragon. The distinctive serpentine Emerald Drake wrapped around his hand, a rare brand that represented special echelon technology access. Now I knew he had served

with Navy Special Forces during the Korean conflict. When he saw that I glanced at his mark, he pulled his sleeve to cover it. Growing impatient, the interrogator narrowed his eyes and drummed his fingers.

“Yes,” I responded. My attention drifted up to the silver pin on his collar. The emblem of the eagle, wheat, and scythe indicated he worked for the Incorporeal Revenue Service. The silver pin indicated a director level position within the IRS. “That is my answer, Director.” A grin slipped through his stern countenance, soon replaced with his stoic mask.

“And after the bayou job,” the black-dressed man continued, “it's your story that you returned to the city and parted ways with Spenner, and he promised to turn in the debtor to the IRS receiving station?”

“Not a story,” I corrected. “That’s what happened.”

The black-dressed man grunted with disapproval, prompting the other, thinner interrogator to step closer. I took a moment to size him up. The second interrogator wore a tailor-made silver suit accented with a white silk mandarin collar. The collar indicated his high ranking in the New Universal Church. Though my computer knowledge far exceeded my understanding of modern theology, I knew enough to understand this man wielded considerable influence. I knew the Universal Church worked side-by-side with the IRS to regulate the shade-trade, so it didn't surprise me to see a priest here. However, the fact that such a high-ranking member of the Church and an IRS Director handled the debriefing of a simple collection raised my suspicions.

The silver-dressed priest represented the opposite qualities of his partner in every respect. He stood garbed in his exquisite clothes at ease. His silk suit, groomed gray hair, clean-shaven face, manicured nails, and lilac-scented cologne told me this man of the cloth did not wrestle with any guilt involving his wealth. The priest offered a warm smile, and placed his soft hand on my shoulder. I readied myself for the inevitable “good cop” routine.

“Thank you for answering candidly, my son,” the silver-dressed man said in a soothing tone, while flashing a wide smile, showing off perfect, alabaster-white teeth. “You will find us most amenable to honesty. That is all we are seeking...”

“Funny thing,” interrupted the black-dressed man, “Spenner never turned in the Jebediah-shade to the IRS transfer station.”

I failed to stifle a surprised look. I gnawed my fingernail, thinking about my next response, and the silver-dressed man noticed my obvious discomfort.

“Jonah, don't worry, we're not accusing you of anything,” the silver-dressed interrogator reassured me. “We're simply looking for the truth. In your initial report, you mentioned something about some unfortunate events on the trip back with your target,” he said with an expression of concern. “Why don't you tell us more about that?”

The black-dressed man, not able to conceal his impatience with the slow progress of the interrogation, snapped. “Oh, enough of this! What do you remember about the video call? Tell us who Spenner talked with on your trip back to New York!”

The silver-dressed man betrayed his warm demeanor for the briefest of moments, flashing a seething look of fleeting anger at his black-clad partner.

“Patience, Barnaby,” the priest said through gritted teeth. “I'm sure Jonah will

explain this to us fully. We need only give him time to recall his thoughts. He has survived some harrowing events.”

Silence blanketed the room as the two agents glared at each other. A palpable tension hung in the air, pushing me like an invisible physical force.

“You're right, Erasmus,” conceded the black-clad man. Now, I knew their names, and that they wanted to know about the call Spenner received on the trip back to New York.

“Perhaps a respite from our discussion would be helpful for everyone,” offered Erasmus. “Jonah, your doctor suggested that you get some exercise. If you feel able, would you like to take a brief walk and return to our chat in a few minutes? I would like to show you something.”

Nodding, I pushed the table to stand. My nervous system shocked my extremities with lightning pain. A grimace twisted my face a brief moment before I regained my composure and walked toward Erasmus. He motioned for me to follow him out a door that slid open from the white wall. I limped out of the room, and entered a wide corridor forking in two directions.

“Come,” Erasmus said, beckoning. “There is someone who is eager to see you.” Erasmus and Barnaby turned right into the beige-painted hallway. We passed through several closed doors labeled with nonsensical government acronyms like NIDJS and ESPCOR.

Our footsteps echoed across the polished black marble floor. At each branch in the corridor maze, a pair of armed guards in brown suits nodded at Barnaby. We passed through five checkpoints until we came to the final corridor, ending with an oak door fashioned with a bronze plaque.

\*\* Incorporal Revenue Service \*\*

\*\* Global Level Auditing Division E3A \*\*

As we approached, two guards flanking the door stepped aside then snapped back to their sentry position.

“Welcome to GLAD, Director Barnaby, s-sir,” stammered the younger guard while the other opened the door.

We entered, and I found myself in one of the bustling command centers of the IRS. Dozens of agents scurried up and down steel stair steps with their heads down, skimming reports on their wrist-coms or hand-screen tablets. On the third floor of the wide, round hall, a tribunal consisting of twenty hovering holo-judges presided over dozens of simultaneous trials. A line of ghostly v-casting people wrapped around the circular second floor for a chance to appeal their case. The central space filled with moving, floating virtual displays all showing different data streams about investigations throughout the world and the moon. It struck me as organized chaos in motion. The business of the IRS involved collecting revenue from dead or near-dead people, and business appeared healthy.

A hawkish, gaunt man dressed in a white lab coat approached Barnaby. He handed over a thin black tablet, and my wrist-com lit by a faint blue illumination. Above the white-coated scientist, a four-by-four personal virtual projection screen floated behind him. A block of calligraphic text shimmered and repeated itself across the display. I smirked when I recognized the handiwork of Sasha's humor algorithm flashing above the scientist, highlighting his scowling face.

There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home.

"The AI is still being--uncooperative," sighed the scientist. "However, all tests are conclusive – she does not violate any Promethean sentience regulations. She passed all criteria by the slimmest margins, but she passed. Quite ingenious how her heuristics--"

"Faith," Erasmus interrupted, dismissing the scientist with an arm wave. He looked to Barnaby. "I believe a show of good faith is in order. Our guest Jonah has been forthcoming. Let him have his equipment and be reunited with his friend." Before Barnaby rebutted, Erasmus smiled and raised his hand. "I'm sure Jonah will refrain from using his cyber-skills to pry into our network. We can trust you, Jonah, yes?"

My instinct told me they returned Sasha for a reason, likely because they could not hack her and hoped that I would reveal the information she possessed. Whatever the reason, I nodded my assent. Barnaby frowned as he examined the report from the scientist. After a few moments of scouring the tablet's data and scratching his head, he relented and thrust the wrist-com into my hands.

"Here," he grunted.

"Thank you," I said, fastening the device onto my arm. My fingers felt the warmth of the light-based finger sensors activating and embracing my hand. As the system rebooted, I heard Sasha's presence.

"Oh captain, my captain, our fearful trip is done," said Sasha into my ear. "It is comforting to be back, sir. My inquisitors seemed keen to learn about your trip with Spenner. Much to their great disappointment, they discovered nothing."

"Good to have you back, Sasha," I whispered.

"Now then," Erasmus said, pulling up two brown leather chairs, one for me and one for him. "I have helped you, and I hope you will aid us. Please, continue with your report. Begin with your departure from Louisiana with Spenner."

Part of me wanted to refuse to cooperate and keep my mouth closed. Then I weighed the benefits. Perhaps by telling what I knew I might also be able to learn more information from their reactions. Reviewing the events of the past few days also seemed to help rekindle my recollections. Besides, in my weakened condition, I made a conservative count of my viable options, and they added up to zero.

My thoughts wandered back two days and I resumed telling my story...

# CHAPTER 3

## Crimson Blues

*“The collaboration of science and religion established a new, better order where citizens will be able to pay all of their societal debts, whether here or in the hereafter. We pay our debts now and forever.”*  
- IRS Commissioner Jefferson McCourt

>> DATE: Sept. 23rd, 2039. Two days before present time.

>> TIME: 6:45 AM.

>> LOCATION: Raleigh, North Carolina, northbound on Interstate 81.

The first two hours of our trip back to New York dragged. Spenner focused on driving while Jebediah sat and stared in the back seat. My attention drifted between the fleeting landscapes of fields and small towns speeding by my window. Appearing lost in thought, I watched my partner from the corner of my eye. He looked older than his forty-two years. Though age had carved crags in his forehead and added crow's feet around his sea-green eyes, he represented a paragon of fitness. His mouth featured a slight angular imperfection, crooked from multiple broken jaws. The war stories etched across his face warned me to stay on this man's good side.

A bloom of fire and smoke pulled my attention toward the clear blue sky to witness something I had not seen before, at least not in person. Through the dirt smudges of my passenger window, I watched a sleek transport space shuttle, supported by two fiery rocket boosters, hurtle toward the moon.

“That is the Sagan Rocket, Jonah,” whispered the voice of Sasha. Her programming granted the spontaneity to provide contextual information on interesting things around me. In this case, I welcomed her commentary as an interruption to boredom. I blinked in response instead of a verbal acknowledgment, still not wanting Spenner to know about her.

“I have found the cargo manifest for the Sagan,” Sasha continued for my ear only. “Owned by the Goliath Corporation, that shuttle is carrying five thousand, six hundred, and seventy-four shades. All of them are assigned to work at the Mare Tranquillitatis, also known as the Sea of Tranquility. They will join a construction battalion expanding Lunar Spire's eastern quadrant.”

My mind imagined the rocket's cramped interior. Hours or days before, those workers had lived as grandparents, parents, sons, and daughters. Those shades would enjoy no rest until the internal timer programmed into their serum expired. They became the world's beasts of burden, carrying humankind to its new manifest destiny in space. Without the need to breathe, they made the perfect worker to build opulent moon habitats.

The rocket's flight opened the endless blue with a long, gray zipper. Its destination, the pale moon, appeared to greet the oncoming space pilgrims. This

scene stoked one of my familiar dreams. In my romantic vision, Vanessa and I embraced atop our home on the Lunar Spire, overlooking a sprawling view of the space colonies and Earth in the distance. Such thoughts fled too soon from my practical, terrestrial-bound troubles. With thoughts of my meager checking account and bills, my reverie faded, just like the fast disappearing rocket.

We continued driving for three more hours, not stopping for food, drink, or fuel. Time crawled, since Spenner remained silent while driving.

“I have observed an interesting temporal phenomenon,” Sasha said to my ear. “As you are unable to respond to me, I observed that my emotional subroutines perceived time as slower than my clock program. Perhaps this is boredom? Accessing a relevant quote from Henry Van Dyke...”

“Time is too slow for those who wait, too swift for those who fear, too long for those who grieve, too short for those who rejoice, but for those who love – time is eternity.”

I gave a thin smile, and nodded for more. For the next hour, Sasha maintained my sanity by reciting wisdom and beauty from Keats, Poe, Angelou, Dickinson, and Frost.

\* \* \*

After another two hours on the highway, I wondered why Spenner chose to travel only on ground roads instead of flying along the aero-lanes. In all likelihood, he preferred old-fashioned driving to avoid the increased air traffic control government scrutiny.

When our car passed Raleigh, North Carolina, billowing gray smoke on the road’s horizon heralded a multi-vehicle accident. To avoid the snarled traffic, Spenner spun the car’s control hand-pads hard, whisking the car off the highway for a small town detour. We barreled through the off-ramp, then entered the local streets. That choice proved no better, since dozens of ambulances with blaring sirens swarmed the local roads. As we crawled along the line of cars, a parade of white and red vans lined up outside the hospital, delivering victims from the accident. My eyes spotted two black sedans parked just far enough away to avoid detection, but close enough to scoop up any debtor that died on the operating tables. Ghouls, I thought, ready for a quick payday. Then Spenner broke his silence.

“A lot busier than my last visit here,” Spenner said, motioning to Mercy General Hospital.

“You there as a patient?”

“Not exactly,” he answered. “Did I tell you about the time my old partner and I reaped twenty debtors in one week?”

“Twenty? How is that—”

“This was a few years ago,” Spenner said, “back when the IRS gave juicy reaping bonuses for their Most Wanted. My partner Daniel and I, we made a record run.” Spenner showed an actual emotion, a frown, for the briefest moment. Like someone had flicked a light switch on and off. Maybe he felt remorse, maybe anger; it appeared and disappeared too fast for me to register. This surprised me somewhat, since my research on Spenner showed that he preferred to work alone.

“One of the targets was Barbara Billups, a patient at that hospital,” he said, clearing his throat to continue. “She owed a ton of dough from a bad real estate deal

her late husband made. The bills she got in the mail gave her a stroke. I got a report that said she died, and I headed out to collect her.”

Our car swerved around a long line of cars waiting their turn because of the detour. Not wanting to bother waiting, Spenner swerved into the side breakdown lane and sped up faster.

“So I show up, and she’s in pain, on morphine, but alive. Inconvenient as all hell, right?” He looked to me for a sympathetic nod, that somehow I understood his feeling of irritation. Instead, his story evoked the worrisome image of my mother in her hospice bed, staving off death so she would not have to face her afterdeath.

“At the same moment, I mean the exact second, I get an alert from my data-hound that my next target is on the move. The late Mrs. Ortega racked up a mountain of loans for her gambling addiction, and the debt fell to her husband. Instead of turning her in to clear his slate, the old romantic tried to flee the US to bury her in her home country of Puerto Rico.” Spenner paused to swerve around a large pothole, cutting off another driver to weave in and out of the one-lane country road. A rising unease in my stomach foreshadowed a dark ending to his story.

“Where was I? Right, so here I was in the hospital and standing in front of the only living person on the IRS Most Wanted list and my next target is about to skip town. I had to think of something if I was going to collect them both in time. So, I hurried her along...”

My eyes widened.

“Wait--what?”

“I didn’t off the lady, I just handed her the morphine controls,” Spenner shrugged. “I may have told a little white lie. That her debt was paid in full and she could, you know, pass along if she wanted. Then I showed her the button to override the drip delivery and she did the rest.” To hide the shiver that went up and down my spine, I shifted in my seat.

“I found a record of the patient he is describing,” Sasha remarked. Her quiet tone hushed even fainter. “Barbara Billups. She was eighty-two years old, and owed 23.2 million dollars. Her death certificate from Mercy General listed her death as an accidental personal overdose on morphine. She’s now served six afterdeath years. Jonah, please increase your threshold of caution with this man.” Now feeling more comfortable with my company, Spenner looked eager to continue his tales.

“If you thought that was funny, listen to what happened with collection number seven during that run. That reaping ended with me jumping on the nose of a moving Cessna. Wait, I’m getting ahead of myself, let me start from the beginning...” While Spenner boasted about his daring interception of Ortega’s private jet, I mulled the survival odds of leaping out of the car.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, the car’s communication console beeped and interrupted Spenner talking about his sixteenth collection. A blue-tinged rectangular display appeared on the driver’s side showing an incoming transmission. He accepted the call with a wave of his hand, summoning a hologram to form on the dashboard’s display. Green photon particles formed a liquid sphere, rippling like a stone thrown into a still pond. The light coalesced to form a featureless human head, bald like an old-style store mannequin. Then the image’s hollow eyes emitted a shaft of white light to

scan Spenner's retina. I tucked my right hand to my side to hide it and tapped my forefinger and thumb together twice, a silent signal to Sasha.

"The message is a new form of advanced ocular encryption, patented by Goliath Corporation and licensed by a handful of governments like Russia and China," Sasha answered. "It is the most secure form of communication to date. I will record the raw footage. Without Spenner's iris and retina gene-map, it will remain indecipherable." Literally, the sender meant the message to be for Spenner's eyes and ears only.

I feigned disinterest in the message and looked out the window, though I kept watching with my peripheral vision. As Sasha predicted, the face in the digital message remained obscured and the audio scrambled into a random chorus of nonsensical beeps and clicks.

"Yes, we have the target," Spenner responded to the unknown caller. "We had mild resistance, nothing serious. Jonah handled himself well. No casualties."

More lower-pitched undecipherable chatter emitted from the console. An unbearable curiosity urged me to use my wrist-com and invoke an echelon, a pre-programmed digital function that coders used for a variety of different situations. The specific one that came to mind decrypted coded messages. Like most hackers, the desire to crack a difficult puzzle or pick a secure lock felt irresistible. Caution prevailed, and my hand dropped back down.

"I'm glad you're happy with our performance," Spenner said to the glittering hologram. Spenner spoke in a flat tone with no hint of real pleasure. His strange affect made me wonder about the accuracy of his responses. I focused my attention on his volume changes, body language, and any subtleties I could detect. His response prompted more unrecognizable chatter issued from the formless face. Then a thin smirk cracked his stoic face just briefly before he responded.

"I understand. That shouldn't be a problem. That will be an easy job. Anything else?"

The transmission concluded with the formless head uttering a final unintelligible string of fading mechanical sounds.

"Thank you, sir, we'll do our best," Spenner responded as the hologram burst into millions of smoldering light photons. He jabbed at the virtual console, and the car responded by accelerating. His attention turned back to me.

"Our client is happy that the stiff's been claimed on time," Spenner said to me. "He's impressed with you and says there will be more jobs coming soon."

"That's great to hear, thanks," I answered. Uncertainty prevented me from committing to more work with him. There would always be more jobs for able-bodied and willing collectors.

"So, back to my story, we're up to collection number sixteen now..." Spenner said. "His name was Peter, the son of a wealthy ex-actor who funded a religious cult. Peter was a pretty-boy, like you, Jonah, but he got a stomach cancer that his faith-healer father tried to cure with prayer. They didn't believe in science and they certainly didn't believe that the dead should become shades. You can probably guess that the prayer didn't work out so well."

As he resumed telling his reaping tale, our car raced down the highway and caught up to a light rainstorm. A few miles further and the storm worsened, sending

sheets of rain sideways onto the windshield. Undeterred, Spenner maintained his high speed, even as we entered a treacherous sub-highway.

“So we invade the compound to collect Peter once the cancer takes him,” he continued, making a hard-right turn around a curve. “And the damned place is filled with armed cultists.” He made a rapid turn at a two-lane country road, flanked by tall green hills. “I shoot my way through, but just before I clear the whole place out, Peter’s father gets a lucky shot and takes out my partner.”

“My condolences about your partner,” I muttered.

“Oh, it worked out,” Spenner replied. “Turns out, Daniel had a lot of debts too, so I made both Daniel and Peter shades, turned them into the local IRS depot, and doubled my take for the day.”

As my mouth opened for an acerbic response, the car's accident prevention system slammed on the brakes and displayed the words: Warning: Crash Imminent. A herd of cows crossed the road at the same time as our car swerved around the blind corner. Lumbering alongside the animals, a lone shade, an emaciated elderly male, pulled a wooden wagon laden with bales of hay.

“HOLY SH--” shouted Spenner, spinning the steering pads in vain. All four tires locked onto the wet road, scorching a black trail toward our inevitable impact. Our car swerved to avoid a brown heifer, slammed into the shade, and then came to an abrupt stop when the shattered pieces of the body jammed the vehicle’s axles. Our seatbelts stretched but prevented us from hitting the windshield. Shaking his head, Spenner tapped his fingers on the car’s virtual display to engage the car's auto-repair mechanism.

“Auto-repair initiated,” spoke a tinny computerized voice. “Foreign object detected. Please remove to hasten repairs.”

We exited the car and braved the rain to survey the damage. Billowing steam from the crippled engine stung my eyes. While we walked around the broken vehicle, the rainstorm intensified to a torrential downpour.

“We need a jack,” Spenner said, crouching down to peer under the car. “Get the stiff out.”

I nodded, slogged through the mud, and opened the back passenger door. Jebediah stared back at me with unblinking eyes and pupils shining a bright shade of yellow.

“Get out of the car and follow me,” I shouted a clear and simple command over the fury of the storm and hissing car. After receiving their serum programming, shades possessed the auditory and mental processing faculties of a well-trained dog. He obeyed, exited the car, and stepped to me.

“Lift the back of the car,” I commanded, pointing to the rear. Jebediah blinked to acknowledge the order. Bending down, he placed his withered hands under the corner fender and lifted the car without any complaint. Like a sturdy mechanical jack, he held the right corner of the car four feet above the ground. Veins around his neck and shoulder gave off a faint yellow luminescence, an aftereffect of the serum coursing through his veins. While his muscles bulged and the car lifted above the ground, my subconscious mind surfaced an often-asked question -- how the serum granted heightened physical prowess and sustained the shades for so many years. To hackers and conspiracy theorists across the datanet, this question

represented the Holy Grail of mysteries. Many amateur armchair scientists speculated the serum contained radioactive isotopes. Other self-proclaimed technology experts hypothesized that shades converted sunlight into energy using a plant-derived chlorophyll compound. A vocal minority of digital pundits argued that symbiotic nanite colonies sustained the shades. However, the world would never know the truth, since the government protected the patented formula as a national secret. Spenner interrupted my musing with a rage-induced scream.

“Jesus H. Christ!” he shouted. “That shade we hit is smeared ALL over the goddamn undercarriage. Looks like the skull and spine got lodged in the axle assembly. This will take time.” In what I can only assume was Spenner's warped sense of humor, he peeled off part of the flattened shade's severed hand and tossed it at me. “I'll need a hand,” he joked. The hand struck my leg and fell to the ground. He laughed and disappeared under the car to continue the repairs.

I just shook my head while regarding the gory appendage Spenner tossed. The gnarled hand still held a diamond wedding ring on one finger. Even though the soul had departed the husk, I still made the sign of the cross and recited a Hail Mary in a hushed tone. Then my thoughts switched to the worry of more debt. We'd destroyed a shade, real property, and that would cost someone money.

“I'm sorry, Jonah,” whispered Sasha. “I could have taken control of the guidance system and maybe spared that shade. However, I would have revealed myself to Spenner.” With the noise of the storm rendering anything under a shout inaudible, I dared a soft, muted response. Otherwise, her sympathy algorithm would continue to review alternate actions she could have done.

“It's not your fault.”

Spenner ripped more bone fragments from the car, causing a brackish liquid to flow from a punctured tank. With the foreign object removed, the auto-repair mechanisms engaged. Three fist-sized silver spheres detached from the engine block. They sprouted legs then skittered like metal insects towards the leaking gap. Then they emitted focused plasma beams from their antennae to cauterize the damage. Using my wrist-com, I tapped into the car's computer system and examined the code governing the repair-bots. Back in my old military days, one of my main areas of specialty involved field cyber-warfare and counter-defense—a fancy way of saying computer hacker. After a few of my code improvements, the repair-bots moved faster and initiated the repair of the oil drum.

Together, the three of us formed an effective team. Jebediah held up the back of the car. Spenner did the grunt mechanical heavy lifting to remove debris, leaving me to handle the technical repair.

Despite our speed, a nagging feeling of anxiety bothered me. Why was the shade we struck wandering around alone? In all likelihood, its master would not be too far behind to discover us with evidence of destroyed property.

“We need to hurry,” I shouted over the storm's fury.

Spenner grumbled his annoyance but seemed to agree as he chiseled at the gore faster. After five more minutes of work by Spenner and the repair bots, we finished.

“Repairs completed,” announced the computer voice from the car's speakers. “The automobile is at 93% capacity and within safe driving thresholds.”

I heard Sasha scoff in my ear. “Technically, it is 92.53%, well within safe and nominal driving standards,” Sasha informed me.

Spenner jumped up from the ground and motioned for me to get Jebediah into the car.

“Jebediah, put the car down slowly,” I commanded. Jebediah complied and lowered his burden back to the ground inch by careful inch. I learned from experience that clear instructions like 'slowly' helped avoid nasty accidents with shades. In most states, owners needed to take online courses and earn a license before operating a shade for any work. When the government first approved and legalized the use of shade labor for private use, there were many learning pains during the first rollout. Many business owners experienced firsthand how literal the shades processed their commands. Today, if a master said something like 'throw out the garbage', shades would comply. Twenty years ago, a first-generation shade's reaction would have been more disappointing, if not dangerous. The IRS scientists put in charge of the research had improved on the serum's original formulae, and subsequent rollouts had added more colloquial phrases to the command phrase lexicon. Even with those improvements, accidents from vague orders still occurred. A famous example that captured national attention had happened in Cape Cod, Massachusetts nineteen years ago. A wealthy businessman had bought a first-generation shade, an expensive purchase back then, to be a house servant and ordered it to: “Move my furniture, hurry up, break a leg.” That unfortunate disaster had led to stricter serum programming protocols and safeguards that prohibited direct or indirect harm to human beings by the undead. Despite those controls, common sense and good practice demanded that owners issue careful, direct, and literal commands.

“Enter the car and sit in the back seat.” Jebediah obliged my instruction and sat down in the back seat without incident.

Before Spenner and I entered the car, a pair of headlights appeared and flooded the area with bright light. Then a deep revving engine sound preceded the arrival of a massive yellow farm vehicle crashing through the bushes. Atop the giant tractor, the dark-haired driver looked down and spotted the smear of gore and splintered bone from the remains of his shade servant.

“WHAT in the name of our great lord have you two assholes done?” he screamed then jumped down to the ground. He picked up the cracked skull of his former servant, then tossed it aside to ready his rusty pitchfork. “You squished MY PROPERTY to a goddamned pulp!” For emphasis, he brandished a long weapon against us.

“Put down the fork, old man,” warned Spenner. “We are armed deputized agents of the IRS, and I've had my fill of southern hospitality today.”

With a bad feeling gnawing at my stomach, my eyes darted around and spotted over two dozen shadowy forms walking behind the tractor. The shade's owner arrived with company.

“Government spooks...we don't like your kind in our parts,” the farmer replied with a slow drawl, stepping closer and twisting his pitchfork at us. He looked young and able-bodied; probably the son of the landowner, I presumed. Mud caked over his high black boots and he wore a thick yellow raincoat over his denim work clothes.

When his brown eyes twinkled and his lips broke into a grin, I knew we faced a young man with something to prove.

“Boys, protect me!” The farmer's command brought the attention of the three dozen shade farmhands. The undead servants dropped their burdens and marched toward their master. With a swiftness belying their dirty and thin bodies, the shades closed ranks and formed an imposing mob.

Sizing up our situation, I realized the odds favored the farmer, especially since my weapon waited in the trunk. One hopeful thought surfaced, that the default serum programming prohibited Shades from directly harming humans. However, if the farmer had hired a local good-ole-boy neurochemist with enough skill to hack the serum, those restrictions could be bypassed. Judging by the smug look on the farmer's face, I guessed he owned several modified and illegal shades capable of mangling us into something unrecognizable. Just as that thought crossed my mind, two shades, one wielding a hoe and the other garden shears, both stepped closer. Violence seemed inevitable. My mind raced to consider strategies to survive.

“We were just passing through and had an accident,” I said in a calm voice, with my arms out wide and palms open. “Why don't we get out of this rain and talk about it?”

Emboldened by the shades gathering around him, the farmer walked closer toward me, threatening me with the three tips of his rusted but still sharp pitchfork.

“You city assholes owe me a debt for my shade,” he demanded. “That was a good worker and you idiots turned it into road kill. I've got half a mind to take your car and let you both crawl back to the city.”

“Take my car?” Spenner hissed. His lip curled crooked with a look of amusement, a look that invited trouble. “You're at fault for letting your shade cross the road. My car was damaged, so YOU owe me.”

That answer inflamed the tension. The farmer took another step toward us, pitchfork lowered, and his shades formed a circle around us. Unfazed, Spenner flicked his stun-rod to life. The weapon exuded a smoky crimson glow of energy around its bulbous metal tip. The light from his stun-rod illuminated the mottled, impassive faces of the shades, a stark contrast to the farmer's snarled lips and furrowed brow.

“Mighty nice glowstick you have there. Boys, go ahead and rip this...”

Feeling desperate, I blurted out a risky compromise.

“WAIT!” I yelled. “You like the stun-rod? That's military grade. Take it. It's worth more than two of your shades.”

Spenner's eyes smoldered. Given his anger, I shifted my stance just in case he decided to attack me for offering up his weapon.

“Well, boy?” the farmer said, pointing his pudgy finger toward Spenner. “I reckon that's a fair deal. I'll forgive you for destroying my chattel if you hand over the glow stick. I could use it to fight off the rustlers that been raiding me lately.”

Spenner stood silent for a moment. I heard his knuckles crack from tightening his grip on the stun-rod. A facial muscle twitched to betray a rage he held inside. Then his posture changed, and an odd expression of amusement played over his face. Unseen by the farmer, his nimble fingers slid across the stun-rod, pressing a few indented buttons on the weapon until it issued a low-pitched whine. The glow

changed from crimson to a dull blue. I assumed he put it into safety mode so he could hand it off.

“Fine,” Spenner acquiesced. “Forget you saw us, get out of our way, and this is yours.”

“Deal,” said the farmer, snatching the offering in a hurry. For a few moments he seemed mesmerized by the inky blue energy issuing from the crown of the rod. Combining the blunt damage from reinforced titanium and the raw power of an industrial electrical stunner, the stun-rod proved to be a formidable melee weapon.

“Follow me, boys,” the farmer called out. “Time to get out of this rain and go home.” Without a word, the pack of thirty-six shades picked up their soggy bales and lumbered through the mud behind their master. The farmer climbed up to his tractor seat, then admired the shimmering mace like some burning victory torch. Before he drove away, I could have sworn that I heard the whine from the weapon grow louder.

Not wanting to stay longer, we rushed back into the car. Time to see if our repair job worked. With a touch of the console, Spenner started the car’s engine with a mechanical roar. Satisfied with his repair job, he turned to me with a smile and I braced myself for an argument related to the loss of his stun-rod.

“Good thinking back there,” he said as we started to drive off. “Really clever of you to offer the stunner to him. Now, let's get out of here before the fireworks.”

As I struggled to understand what Spenner meant, a loud explosion rocked the surrounding area followed by a bright red flash and a plume of crimson smoke.

“What in the hell did you do?” I yelled in protest.

“Spare the rod, spoil the child,” Spenner chuckled, pushing the car into a higher gear. “He got what he deserved.” Then I recalled Spenner pressing the extra buttons on the stun-rod before he gave the weapon to the farmer. I realized his subtle movements had set the stun-rod on self-destruct, and that the whining noise had come from a massive overcharge of its power core. We departed the farm in silence, bumping over a piece of debris from the exploded tractor before we rejoined the open highway again.

During the rest of the ride home, I accessed the car's computer from the passenger console, pretending to check road conditions and traffic. While Spenner focused on driving, I downloaded all the video footage from the car’s recording camera to prove Spenner murdered the farmer. With a few nonchalant taps, I transferred the data to my wrist-com storage banks.

“I have the video,” Sasha confirmed. “The video quality is poor due to the storm, but convincing enough. I will feel much better when you have parted ways with your current partner.” As her code architect, I swelled with a father’s pride knowing that her empathy engrams registered compassion and an appropriate distaste for Spenner. During the remainder of the trip, we passed another five farms and six shade-staffed quarry mills without incident. Of course, I let the sociopathic driver choose the radio stations for the remainder of the trip.

\* \* \*

After explaining the farm encounter to my interrogators, a sensation of weariness overtook me. The IRS command room spun around as if I stood in the center of a merry-go-round. I chalked this up to sleep deprivation, dehydration, and hunger, all part of the strategy my interrogators employed to wring the truth out of

me. After I shook my head, my vision steadied and the nausea passed.

An influx of collection agents and supervisors buzzed around the large room, doing their business and delivering reports to superiors. Along the far wall, a series of pod-cubes contained IRS tax auditors in the midst of heated discussions with debtors, most of them v-casting in remotely from different parts of the world.

In the room's center, a double-sized floating screen displayed the infamous Most Wanted List. Only the most dangerous criminals and deceased debtors with the largest bills made it onto that list. Each of the names also showed the IRS agent assigned to that particular case. Scanning the list from bottom to top, my eyes widened when I saw the top position on the board.

\*\* Incorporal Revenue Service. Most Wanted. (Classified) \*\*

\*\* 1. Col. Colin Spenner \*\*

\*\* Assigned IRS Agent: Casey Steele (DECEASED) \*\*

Adjacent to the Most Wanted List screen, another display showed an interactive map dedicated to tracking Spenner's movements. Five feet behind, a black-suited junior agent walked up to Barnaby and asked to give him an update. I leaned back and strained to hear.

"Agents Steele and Hunt both disappeared off the grid today," said the junior agent in a worried voice. "We--we don't have any current leads."

"Activate Bellamy and Hicks," whispered Barnaby. "I want Colin back on our grid."

Before I heard any more of the conversation, Erasmus interrupted my eavesdropping by handing me a cool glass of water.

"You must be parched, my son, please drink," he said. I eyed the glass, looking for any traces of sediment indicating drugs. My thirst won over my suspicion and I sipped the water. Satisfied with its purity, I gulped the whole cup and felt refreshed.

"After Spenner drove over the farmer's shade...it was most kind of you to offer the Lord's blessing," Erasmus said. "Unnecessary, of course, since the soul had already migrated to Him, All Glory in the Highest. But a kind and noble gesture, my son." My instincts told me that the priest's warm demeanor felt genuine, but I reminded myself that in my weakened state I would start becoming more susceptible to their small acts of kindness. I steeled myself for the next round of questioning.

"Sasha did release a small snippet of video to us of the farmer's death," continued Erasmus. "The footage exonerates you and clearly implicates Spenner."

"Your AI refused to give us all of the video footage from your trip," Barnaby said. "Tell her to comply."

"In time, Barnaby," Erasmus countered. "Let us allow our guest to continue his account. Jonah, would you indulge us with the remainder of your story?"

I nodded, and my mind sifted through yesterday's events, when Spenner and I had arrived in New York.