

TJ SEDGWICK



THE FREE
CITIZEN

A DYSTOPIAN SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

THE FREE CITIZEN (ARC v1.12)

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THE FREE CITIZEN

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You can chain me, you can torture me, you can even destroy this body, but you can never imprison my mind.

Mahatma Gandhi

As soon as the cell door slammed shut, Calvin Rae knew he was in the darkest place he'd ever been. The torturer's boss had given him an hour to cooperate. No rights, no legal recourse. His wife had betrayed him. They'd branded him a traitor, a disgrace to his country, to the uniform. They'd forced him to commit unspeakable acts in the name of their greater good. Now he was a captive of those he'd once served. Fifty-nine minutes to go.

He arose from the thin mattress atop the metal bed-tray, the extra-large orange jumpsuit taut over his chest and shoulders. Shuffling barefoot to the steel sink, he craned his neck and regarded himself in the scratched, unbreakable mirror of polished metal. It was positioned for the average detainee, too low for a man of his height. The three-day stubble on his sturdy, defined jaw and the intensity in his earthen-brown eyes told of the ordeal he had endured. His heart sank to as-yet uncharted depths as he thought of what was happening to his wife at that moment. He was hurting badly, and never before had felt so alone. The soldiers hadn't harmed them when his wife had betrayed him, sending them both into captivity. His pain was not physical. Not yet. In less than an hour that cruel bastard of an intelligence officer would be back though, and the woman torturer, masquerading as a doctor, would soon get to work. His military buzz-cut felt prickly to the touch as he ran his fingers through it, exhaling, despair welling up to claim any vestige of hope that remained. He sat back down on the holding cell cot, bowed his head, shaking it in self-loathing, in disgust at what he'd done, at what he'd been *made* to do. He blamed himself for the choice he'd made so long ago, when the world made sense. Now he was paying for it. Paying for it with interest. Now thirty-six years old, he'd sown the seeds of his own downfall in 2066, sixteen years ago, when the country was still the United States, when he was an undergrad, full of hope, a life of divergent possibilities still before him. Only one choice had seemed rational at time: to accept the two-year Army ROTC scholarship and commit to active service after graduation. In the sixteen intervening years, his life had converged to this moment, this place, this precipice, beyond which he saw only darkness.

2066 was a fateful year. The Global Depression had only just begun. His parents had lost their jobs—and later it would turn out, their careers. With it went the support paying for his studies. High fees, no jobs. Prospects seemed grim. The Army offered a secure career, training, comradeship, purpose. The Army offered him a meaningful future. The alternative risked a lifetime of debt, bullshit jobs and succumbing to the high-tech distractions from meaninglessness that afflicted so many. The search for purpose, to be something great, to serve a higher cause, to make his mark. He knew these were driven by the finite nature of life, by mortality. Returning to backwater New Zealand—where he'd spent the first ten years of life before moving to America with his parents—had been an option then but wasn't any more.

States south of the US-Mexico border, and elsewhere, had been in turmoil ever since 2066. By 2069, the Mexican State had all-but collapsed, its carcass fought over by heavily-armed factions. America's southern border was like a sand barrier built by kids on the beach as it failed to hold back the tide. A great, king-tide of humanity in all its forms. Refugees. Economic migrants. Criminals. Insurgents. Stability was at stake. Like never before, the military was a bulwark against the growing threat of civil unrest. People never thought it could happen here. But it did. Extraordinary times called for extraordinary measures. What was once beyond the pale

became the inevitable, as the electorate found solace in the easy fixes of demagogues and extremists. Wolves in sheep's clothing. The Overton Window well and truly shifted. Shifted right. Shifted to President White, the old duopoly withering on the vine of political history as the toxic, forbidden fruit of the Nation First Party swelled to replace it. Election year, 2072, and President White and his party won a landslide victory, controlling both the House and the Senate.

Rae gritted his teeth, then let loose a ferocious roar, a caged lion furious at his captors, at the world, at himself. Panting, he hauled himself up, and gripped the cold cell bars, resting his head against the hard steel, faintly aware of the uptick in activity in the forward operating base outside. From somewhere distant came a disturbance, shouting, something else indiscernible to his current state of mind. His conclusion: testosterone-fueled soldiers being put through their paces for what seemed likely to come next. More war, more violence. The distant sounds died down.

2072—ten years ago—was the year he joined the elite US Army Rangers as a First Lieutenant. His mind went back in time, bringing some temporary relief from his current torment. He'd grown to be a proud American, a patriot, a defender of the people, a defender of the country his dear parents at that time still called home. No one knew how the State of Emergency called in 2072 would end. At the time, he only knew how it had begun: with a spate of seemingly unstoppable terrorist attacks on major American cities that all the power of US law enforcement, intelligence and the military couldn't quell. Anger now seethed inside him as he wondered if the elements of those same agencies that had been meant to protect had actually orchestrated it. What followed was a toxic mix of home-grown uprising against unemployment and inequality and an insurgency, supposedly led by Mexican crime lords and supported by foreign enemies. Ripe for exploitation by President White and Nation First. Protest groups and criminal gangs occupied parts of many American cities as the authorities were stretched towards impotence. Refugees, fighters and criminals continued to flood across the Mexico-US border as well as from the Caribbean and further afield. Democratic Alliance forces secured the Canadian border. Already diminished trade, faded. The once-mighty global US military network shrunk to a handful of outposts as any units of meaningful strength were recalled to support the Homeland. The true intent of President White's ideology revealed itself gradually. Not until a few days ago did Rae realize that his allegiance to the noble ideals of the United States had been subverted by propaganda and fear and means hitherto unused. The American Union came into being after the referendum of 2074, wiping away nearly three-centuries of the US Constitution. What followed was known as *The Renaissance*. Only now did he grasp its true implications.

Catching his breath, he turned and leaned against the bars, eyeing the surveillance camera embedded in the stark white ceiling of the cinder block cell. No doubt, Intel Prick was enjoying his anguish. What choice was there but for him to betray those he now trusted? Those on the right side of history. His wife had betrayed him, but he didn't blame her. How could he? She'd tried to warn him, but they had her just like they now had him—in an impossible position. It wasn't just the prospect of torture that scared him—he'd been trained to deal with that, as far as any person ever could be. No, it was what they were threatening to do to his wife. To get him on trumped-up charges of domestic abuse. To give her away, to be used and abused, beyond his reach, a life as the plaything of a powerful man twice her age. A wave of nausea sent him stumbling towards the steel toilet and onto his knees. He wretched uncontrollably, tears welling as he threw up bile and the meager contents of his stomach. Spitting out the noxious, acidic remnants of sick, the specter of suicide came to him for the first time.

“No!” he screamed out, resisting those thoughts, pushing them away. “No, no, no. Not gonna give in to you bastards! No fuckin’ way!”

If they were going to torture him, he’d die resisting. Better than the life of captivity, of slavery that awaited him even if he did tell all. He’d send his mind to a different time and place, a sanctuary from the worldly pain they would surely inflict. Perhaps he’d go back to the time spent as a smiley eight-year-old boy on the Coromandel beach digging holes with his dad. Hot water beach was what they called it in New Zealand on account of the geothermally-heated water that rose up to fill holes dug into the sand. He felt the welcoming embrace envelop his bony little body as he giggled excitedly getting into the hole filled with steaming spring water. The sun was low in the cloudless sky, its golden rays illuminating his dad’s beaming face as he leaned down and ruffled his boy’s hair. Rae realized he was smiling, and in that instant his face sagged as the spell broke and his devastating reality came rushing back.

He stood, wiped his mouth clean and spat on the floor, eyes boring into the surveillance camera above. A renewed strength born of resistance to his captors made him stand tall, a crazed but determined smirk growing. He stared to infinity as thoughts came of his wife. How he’d wake up to see her sitting beside him, studying her awakening husband. In her azure-blue irises he saw her love, her understanding born of a past of mutual struggle and support. He thought back to the time she’d entwined her fingers with his as they planned the life they wanted to build together. A life together which seemed destined to be unfulfilled. Their children never to be born. Never to play on the beach without a care in the world. A solitary tear slid down his cheek, fragility overwhelming him with grief. His nightmare of reality had reasserted itself once again, a smirking demon ready to heap more misery onto his flailing soul. The simple truth was, there was no escape. Disarmed, caged and surrounded by thousands of combat-ready troops, only an intermittent flame of hope kept total darkness at bay.

Five days earlier, the world had been a very different place. The mission to the Space Station Erasmus. The hideous, extraterrestrial Screamers and the causative parasite, which had plagued swathes of Earth since ‘the Arrival’, three years ago. His bid to save humanity from that extant affliction had changed everything. He recalled those fateful days just gone as the arrow of time relentlessly delivered him to the moment of dread, now just minutes away.

Valor is superior to number.

Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus

Before

It was 2082, three years since the impact across the Atlantic in Europe—some said a meteorite; the State Intelligence Agency said an alien ship. Whatever it was, it carried the parasite, origin unknown. What *was* known was its effect on humans, transforming them into Screamers under parasite control.

As an operative of the 1st Combined Action Group, Captain Calvin Rae was at the tip-of-the-spear. The small, elite unit continued to shape history. Forged in the fires that swept through the United States at the time of the Renaissance, they continued the fight under the cover of deniability. He was a veteran of hundreds of small-squad and solo operations and knew space missions were rare. He also knew space was hard. His mission would be hard. Nothing expressed it better than the national maxim: *Freedom Through Struggle*. The risk told of the prize, their faith in him told of his abilities—natural and enhanced. And one enhancement was of prime importance; the one that worked like a tireless conductor, orchestrating the symphony of the subconscious mind, ensuring loyalty and belief and patriotism. Rae—the consciousness, the *him* inside—believed that he was king and president of his own mind. All humans do. The illusion of consciousness.

In the briefing room, he'd had the honor of meeting General Hood himself. Only Major Warwick—Rae's commanding officer—and the general's female aide accompanied them in the small, brightly-lit, minimalist space adjoined to the hangar at Joint Base McKinnon.

The diminutive General Hood—right-hand man of President White—had said with his famous intensity, his slow Southern drawl deliberate and weighty, "Succeed, and humanity regains its freedom from the darkness. *Failure* means a fate worse than death—for you, your loved ones and our beloved Citizens. Today you can turn the tide, Captain Rae."

Rae had met his cool level gaze as the military leader of the Renaissance let the words sink in.

"Yessir," said Rae. "I've dealt with Screamers before, on past operations."

His eyes wandered to the general's cybernetic hand, its gray satin alloy protruding from his jacket sleeve. It was common knowledge that the then Colonel Hood had lost it in battle, during the siege of Washington—the traitors' last stand against President White's accession. Hood noticed his stare and raised his arm, pulling up his jacket sleeve, proudly revealing more of the robotic prosthesis.

"Just like them damned traitors in the glory years, bastard Screamers only understand the barrel of a gun, Captain. Just make damned sure you don't become one of them. If that parasite infects you then you'd best just turn that gun on yourself, that's for damn sure."

"Yessir," said Rae, solemnly, obediently. "Fate worse than death, sir."

"No mercy. You hear me, son?"

"Yessir!" he screamed, the fanaticism of belief coursing through him, chomping at the bit to unleash his deadly skills on a deserving foe.

“Major Warwick here’s briefed you already,” continued Hood, stroking his dark brush moustache. “And he’s uploaded the objective to your mindchip. Succeed up there and we’ll take down the Alliance and the parasite they’ve allowed to spread. That they’ve been *instrumental* in spreading. Whatever bull any Alliance bastard tells you, don’t you believe it. They’ve always been our enemy and now they’re an unpredictable, alien-controlled enemy. They’re *humankind’s* enemy. Let me be clear: them damn Alliance bastards have blood on their hands. Millions of humans infected, never to live, love and prosper again. They’ve turned down all our offers of help. We’ve tried, but their governments are compromised. We’re taking matters into our own hands. We’re relying on you, Captain Rae.”

Rae felt Hood’s dark eyes fix on his, ready to sear a message indelibly in his mind.

“Your *wife* is relying on you. Don’t you ever forget that.”

Rae paused, the trance-like state hard to shake.

“Yessir! My wife is relying on me!”

That was yesterday. Leadership telling hard truths in no uncertain terms. He knew General Hood could be taken at his word. All Citizens trusted and admired the great general of the Renaissance, nearly as much as the president himself. Without his leadership, the loyalist units would’ve surely succumbed to the traitors. Control the military, control the nation. The general’s words were not hyperbole. Rae had seen first-hand what the alien presence had done to people in Europe. Whatever had sent the parasite across the lightyears to Earth must have known enough about humans for it to work on us. He thought about how devilishly clever it was.

Why send an invasion force when you could just co-opt the intelligent beings already on Earth? Far more efficient. Less mass. Less resources. Genius.

He recalled the general’s words. He was right—it was their loved ones they fought for too, not just their own ass or the great nation to which they belonged. An image of Cora appeared, crystal clear in his mind’s eye. She was a spectacular, elegant woman with a calm, confident smile and striking azure eyes, contrasting her olive skin and dark features. Imagining her provided comfort, galvanized his will. His beloved wife of eight years was safe at home in Sanctuary City Chicago—a bastion of civilization in a world of peril. He recalled their last conversation, about starting a family. She was convinced they’d soon get permission, but he wasn’t so sure given their important roles. His yearning to father her children surfaced often. It was strong, from deep within yet momentary, disappearing almost the moment he’d registered the thoughts in his consciousness. Anyway, yearnings or not, only the Regime could decide. That was perfectly normal. All Citizens saw the wisdom in that. He expunged the thoughts of love and emotion that had accompanied the untimely image of Cora. Only focus and struggle would ensure mission success.

Freedom Through Struggle.

Hail President White!

Hail the Renaissance!

Just the first part of the mission had been revealed at the briefing, such was the need for secrecy: infiltrate the enemy station in low Earth orbit. The enemy couldn’t torture out of him what his *conscious* mind didn’t know. He’d been around long enough to know the prime objective would be to extract, kill or destroy

something or someone. That was what he did. Extract. Kill. Destroy. All for the greater good. And almost all ops these days were about the alien presence, which had descended like a dark cloud over Earth after the Arrival in 2079. The enemy space station, Erasmus, hadn't been spared from infection, that much was clear.

At midnight, the three-stage Valkyrie IV had launched from Joint Base McKinnon, in the American Southwest, deep inside the Badlands. At 0014 hours, his stealth capsule—Darkstar-One—had parted with the Valkyrie's final stage along with the *declared* payload—a communications satellite. By 0015 hours, he'd engaged full cloaking and Darkstar-One vanished against the starfield, its radar signature disappearing beside the comms satellite. Outside, the satellite powered away with sustained puffs of monopropellant, as his gloved fingers tapped a series of commands on the comms panel overhead.

"Darkstar-One, this is control," said the female voice in his helmet's headset. "Confirming IQL established. Please copy."

"Copy that, control. Secure link established," he said, referring to the Instantaneous Quantum Link—an undetectable means of communication. Classified. Experimental.

"Darkstar-One, confirming zero detection on all-sensors," she said. "Please confirm rendezvous orbit has been achieved."

No one, including ground control, could now track him as he sped around low Earth orbit at eight kilometers per second. Rae knew the best cloaking tech the American Union's military researchers had devised rendered his capsule like a ghost in the night. Revolutionary and restricted to covert units.

"Confirmed. Intersection with target in eighty-three minutes. Closing at twenty meters per second."

"Acknowledged, Darkstar-One," she said, betraying hint of relief. "Good luck, Captain. Our hopes go with you. Out."

Rae exhaled long and hard, closing his eyes for a few seconds, only aware of his thoughts and the helmet's gentle flow of cool air. Relaxation embraced him despite the high stakes ahead. He couldn't tell if it was training or his neural implant that provided such calm. His eyes flicked open and he switched the headset to *External View*. Complex patterns of night-lit cities traced the congregations of humanity on coasts and rivers and on the black canvas of the land below. The glow of the planet's atmosphere foretold of the Sun's light beyond Earth's mass. Somewhere, about 1,600km ahead, sped the enemy station, SS Erasmus. Darkstar's orbit stalked the Erasmus, closing the gap. Covert entry, absent of detectable retro-burns, called for a gradual approach, and that would take time.

Night turned to dazzling day after seventy-five minutes of mentally rehearsing what he knew of the plan. He checked all systems for the umpteenth time as rendezvous loomed. Gradually, the SS Erasmus resolved from a bright point of light to something more. On his visor display, he saw the station's white cylindrical modules, multi-port dock, and huge solar arrays hanging in the blackness. He removed his flight helmet and replaced it with the matte gray combat helm with its opaque visor and side-mounted, forward-pointing, stereoscopic sensors. From that point on he'd see, hear, and sense the world through those sensors via the visor display. The combat helm was the last part of his closely-fitting combat suit, the fishbowl flight helmet a misfit always destined to remain tethered inside the capsule. Checking the combat helm's heads-up display, Rae knew the air now entering his lungs came from the slimline backpack integrated with the combat suit.

Despite being a veteran captain of the 1st Covert Action Group, serving in and above the Badlands—or Military Operations Zone—this was only his third orbital mission. Mission one: rescue the crew of the abortive

Mars-bound scientific mission from Earth orbit. Mission two: the termination of enemy spies on Zenith Station—the American space station. Now came mission three: rendezvous with SS Erasmus—a 250m-long enemy research station. Infiltrate the facility. After that: classified but electronically implanted in his subconscious mind during the briefing.

Even Rae—his conscious mind, at least—didn't know what came next. But that didn't concern him. That was how it had been ever since the enhancements had rendered his previous life blurry. The neural pathways, constituting memories, had eroded quickly once the neural implant had taken hold. It happened to everyone and it didn't worry him. Perfectly normal. Only faint memories remained of his childhood, growing up in New Zealand, and of his parents. When those recollections came, momentary sorrow welled inside, before a hit of some feel-good hormone—he wasn't sure what—fixed the sadness. The usual trigger of such thoughts was a glimpse of the tattoo on his upper left arm. The outline of the country he'd renounced after swearing his allegiance to a greater cause. And beside the tattooed map of North and South Island, the word, 'Aotearoa'—New Zealand in the Maori language. An enemy state and part of the Democratic Alliance. For some inexplicable reason, he'd never quite gotten around to removing it. It had somehow escaped the attention of the authorities too. Maybe they didn't know what it was, or simply hadn't noticed. Anyway, everyone knew that patriotic deficiencies occurred mostly in natural-born United Statesers. Their allegiance to the Stars and Stripes and their misguided Constitution corrupted them, obscuring the superiority of the American Union.

Three missions made him a veteran when it came to space. He wondered if there would be more with international tensions mounting. So far, the phony war remained below the bar for open conflict. Another Cold War threatening to turn hot. If full-scale conflict ever came to space, it would be short and would render Earth-orbit unusable, with millions of fragments zipping around faster than bullets. And without space-based technology, the world would be unrecognizable. Another way of mutual assured destruction—the doctrine credited with the twentieth century's Cold War staying cold. Rae wasn't sure the established, acrimonious world order would endure. Ever since the Arrival, he, like everyone else, knew the game had changed. Old tensions between the American Union and the other Great Powers—the Democratic Alliance, China and Russia—had worsened since well before the Renaissance in 2074, when President White replaced the US Constitution and removed the term limit. That was just cementing the gains his movement had already secured. Then in 2079, three years ago, came the Arrival. No one knew for sure what the new enemy's ultimate goal was. Everyone assumed it was total conversion of humanity. All they seemed to strive for was infecting new hosts. And the spread continued apace. The American Union was a fortress like never before. Rae believed in the righteousness of his country, the struggle to protect their way of life and resist all enemies. Ever since he'd joined up a decade ago, he'd felt the struggle was a part of him. It was his calling. Now their enemies weren't just ideologically different like the Russians, the Chinese, or the Democratic Alliance. Now the enemy was a different species—terrifying, rapacious devils who bowed to no reason and only understood violence. He'd seen Screamers in the flesh and could hardly describe the feelings they imbued. It wouldn't be long until he faced off against them once more.

Europe had been ground zero—what at first had been misidentified as a small meteorite, crashing down near the Dutch village of Oostrum. It contained the parasite—an organism perfectly matched to commandeer the faculties of its human host and use them as a vector to spread and control.

Spread and control, thought Rae. *If the Screamers have a motto, Spread and Control would be it.*

The rest was history. Not only did he live in the stream of history, but he could shape its path. He sighed as he recalled this sad progression of events, then tried to blank it out of mind. Focus came quickly. Contact with the enemy demanded nothing less. Now on suit-air he knew the clock was ticking. Finite resources: air, power, and—if it ever came to going extra-vehicular—monopropellant. Breathing station air would mean infection and a life of torment and pain and... He didn't want to contemplate.

Contact with the Screamers was minutes away. As his matte-black, stealth capsule hurtled around the Earth, his future narrowed to the station, suspended in blackness above Earth's magnificence. In that moment his whole life seemed a prelude to the secrets within. The SS Erasmus loomed large as Darkstar-One slipped unseen towards the unsuspecting host. The critical moment rushed headlong towards him. Infiltration was next. What awaited after that was locked away in his subconscious. But once Rae knew, it would feel like he'd always known.

Men make history and not the other way around.

Harry S Truman

The Democratic Alliance—consisting of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, and South Korea—was in Rae’s view, cynically named. As all American Union Citizens knew—there was nothing free and fair about the enemy’s pretense of democracy. Nor was there any superiority in their system. Still, that era was ending. Now something far more terrifying was co-opting the old enemy. That they regarded the SS Erasmus the jewel in the crown of their space-based facilities, Rae couldn’t disagree. The research station had taken ten years and over a trillion dollars—even with most of the heavy lifting done by their Skylon II, a single-stage to orbit spaceplane costing far less than rocket-based launches.

Now three minutes separated Rae and Darkstar-One from the Erasmus. The length of two football fields, the huge, complex structure now dominated his view. Two large white cylinders—measuring fifty meters long by twenty in diameter—sat at either end. Between them were two columns of five narrower, but otherwise identical, modules. In the same plane, eighty-meter-long struts holding multiple bronze-colored solar panels, sprouted from the flanks of the ten smaller modules. Rae zoomed Darkstar’s external camera to Large Module 1—the space-dock and service module on the nearside. Along the axis of Large Module 1 were four circular, metal docking ports. Only the far left one was occupied—a Skylon II that had flown out of Europe last week, tracked by Space Command at McKinnon. The cloaked Darkstar-One flew a direct course for the center-right port, its millimeter-perfect trajectory already set in motion, the solar wind too weak to alter the orbital mechanics at play. Adrenaline was kicking in. He felt on-edge, proximity making real the closing velocity of twenty clicks a second.

Darkstar, initiate micro-burn and de-cloak on my mark, he thought, his neural chip communicating directly with the capsule. Only the capsule’s computer could coordinate the powerful, but brief sequence that was about to happen next.

“Acknowledged,” said the female voice of Darkstar, audible only in his mind.

Rae switched his head-up display to radar visualization. A colored 3D visualization of the Erasmus’s radar coverage filled his helmet’s display. Overlapping umbrellas of radar energy covered almost every part of the station’s surroundings. But not all of it. The blind spot between the station’s numerous radar globes sat like a pyramid-shaped void extending ten meters to its apex, some of it above his target port. He would need to place his trust in stealth technology until reaching the blind spot. At this range, even a tiny radar signature would alert the enemy. Visual cloaking was just an extension of full-spectrum stealth, but unlikely to betray him on a camera feed or due to a chance view through a porthole.

Twelve meters, eleven, ten, nine, eight—mark!

Darkstar read his thoughts and a moment later, Rae felt the momentary brick-wall-force of rapid deceleration as the retro-thrusters burst into life for a microsecond—enough to go from twenty meters a second to a gentle drift, no more than a snail’s pace. Blood rushed to his head, eyes bulging, pain in his cranium, a stone-hard jerk against the five-point harness. Then it was over, a dull headache all that remained.

“Micro-burn sequence complete,” said Darkstar. “Distance to target: 7.1 meters. Closing speed: 0.21 meters per second.”

Darkstar, initiate hack sequence now.

“Acknowledged,” said, Darkstar. Then came a pause and, “Connection to Erasmus established...”

The next pause felt like forever. Rae watched the circular, satin-gray alloy docking port grow to fill his external feed and counted down the distance, meters becoming centimeters. If the hack failed, the enemy would know he’d docked. He grew impatient.

Darkstar, update. Now!

Silence. Half a meter remained. He reflexively checked his sidearm—a semi-automatic with minimally-penetrating 9mm rounds.

“Hack sequence successful. Docking system control established.”

Rae exhaled long and hard, ignoring the bead of sweat running into his eye.

A second later, Darkstar-One’s nose-mounted port mated with the enemy’s dock with a gentle *thrum*. Next came the whirl of servos, followed by a quiet metallic sliding, a *click*, and then silence.

“Docking successfully masked from enemy station’s computer. Docking complete.”

Darkstar, patch through the station’s external video feed of the docking ports.

He trusted the stealth but needed to check. Double-checking had kept him alive too many times to count—overseas ops in warzones, many more in the Military Operations Zone or Badlands, as it had come to be known. The Badlands covered virtually all continental American territory between the Mexico and Canada buffer zones. Canada was a Democratic Alliance enemy, its continued existence owing to the mutual defense pact with its allies. Mexico was a failed state. The islands of sanity amongst the Badlands were the Sanctuary Cities. Only Citizens and Serviles were freely permitted in Sanctuary Cities. The same applied to military bases, Mega-Farms and Resource Zones—mines, oilfields, timber forests and the like. Rae knew from countless operations that Illegals and terrorists swarmed the Badlands and its crumbling, battle-scared cities. Cities like Memphis, Austin, El Paso-Juarez, and what the sea hadn’t yet claimed of New Orleans and Miami. There were many more of what were once part of the American Union’s predecessor, the United States of America. That was history. A new and better nation had arisen.

Freedom Through Struggle, thought Rae, recalling the national maxim. And not just recalling it—*believing* it.

The video feed from one of the Erasmus’s external cameras appeared on his helmet display. Still just the Skylon II in the far-left port. He studied the picture closely, the only discernible clue to Darkstar’s presence was a mirage-like shimmer around the center-right docking port.

Not perfect. But he who doesn’t look, doesn’t see, he thought. But he did wonder if the parasite somehow changed a host’s senses. He censured himself for worrying about what he couldn’t change. His stoic mindset had served him well.

He switched his combat suit to stealth mode, rendering him as invisible as Darkstar-One on account of similar technology. This included his sidearm—an extendable tether providing the power for its stealth coating. He checked all suit systems, including rebreather function. It was vital this stayed on despite the presence of breathable air in the station. The parasite was thought to spread via spores carried in the air, which could infect a new host via respiration, the eyes and even bare skin. He unclipped the harness and pulled himself to the hatch.

He accepted the incoming message to his helm via Darkstar’s IQL—the subspace link, undetectable to the enemy station. Time synchronization with Center meant they knew when to send the objectives.

“Captain, this is Center. Standby for your next objectives. I have just sent the command to your neural implant to release your orders”.

Instantaneously, he knew the next part of the mission like he'd always known. In a way he had, but only the subconscious part of his mind, where it had been encrypted. Now he knew the station, knew all that Intel knew. Understood the mission and its risks at far as they did. A level of detail hard to convey in words.

Following protocol, Center ran him through it in summary. “Primary objective is as follows: retrieve the prototype enemy device from Module L2, marked here... You should now be seeing the 3D layout of the station with the device marked as a red blinking dot in the second large module—the L2 module at the other end of the station from where you are docked. Captain, please confirm.”

The 3D rendering had appeared in his mind's eye, leaving his visor display alert to the outside world. His route would need to take him into the L1 module to which he was docked, then through three successive small modules—research labs connected end-to-end. Finally, a right-hand turn into L2, in the center of which sat a cluster of what were marked as computer equipment. The detail on that part of the rendering wasn't much, but they looked like multiple server cabinets surrounding a sphere perhaps two meters across. The red marker dot blinked insistently dead center.

“Yessir, visualization of mission and device location is confirmed.”

“Good. Recover the sphere and exfiltrate. Recovery via Pegasus within the recovery zone,” he said referring to the volume of airspace roughly above the American Union plus some of the Pacific to the west. A Pegasus aircraft would pluck the Darkstar from the sky after re-entry.

“Confirmed, Center.”

“Note the heavy enemy presence. Intel says fifteen on board—assume they're all Screammers.”

Fifteen, thought Rae. He'd seen what they could do. Inhuman in every sense. Despite his training, they sent a shiver down his spine. At the same time, it saddened him that these once-humans were lost forever—to his knowledge, no cure had been found. American military research informed that finding one was a monumental task because of the way the parasite rewired the brain.

“Secondary objective: destroy the SS Erasmus and every one of those devils on board. You *must* destroy the facility, so they cannot remake this prototype device. Is that understood, Captain?”

“Yessir—confirmed. Destroy the station, ensure no survivors.”

“And one more thing, Captain: the device must be removed with spherical covering intact.”

“Acknowledged.”

“And it goes without saying: any intel you can pick up is always valuable.”

“Yessir—gather actionable intel as usual, sir.”

“Good luck, Captain. Our hopes go with you. Out.”

Silence returned, he was on his own. The Screammers awaited. Again, his thoughts turned to his wife. He found bringing her to mind brought comfort when he needed it. She'd been there for him at his time of need when he'd had no one else to count on. No one else who would understand and nurse him back to health after the devastating head injury he'd suffered on the ill-fated mission to take down the insurgents in Baton Rouge in late 2073. Sure, the military had provided for his medical needs and rehabilitation, but his traumatic concussion had other consequences. The debilitating depression, the bursts of anger, loss of balance, of short-term memory. Cora had put her life on hold, shown a level of compassion he'd seen from no one else. He'd grown to feel safe

with her. She intrigued and challenged him in equal measure. Her passion for her business matched his own for soldiering. She was ambitious and driven and well connected—a potent combination in someone who had her looks. He knew she understood how much soldiering meant to him, how it was part of him. With the military stretched, and trying to re-establish civil order, he had returned to active duty after marrying Cora in late 2074. He counted himself a very lucky man. Their relationship was testament to how love could cut across social boundaries in their great country. They all had a lot to thank the Regime for. He'd never admit it publicly, but he actually thought he loved his wife more than the president and the Regime and the Renaissance put together.

He pushed away the erroneous thoughts, chastising his own mind for wandering on dangerous ground.

Hail President White! Hail the Renaissance! Freedom Through Struggle!

His mental recital seemed to cleanse him, restore the feeling of pure patriotism all Citizens held dear.

His grip on the handrail beside the hatch grew tighter in anticipation, his muscle movements re-acquainting themselves with micro-gravity.

It's showtime, he thought.

One deep breath later he opened the hatch.

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The hatch opened with an almost inaudible electrical whirl punctuated by the slightest puff of air as the pressure equalized between Darkstar and its unsuspecting host. Bright light streamed into the capsule. With an effortless confidence, Rae pulled his invisible body, pistol first, into the L1 module. He glided in zero-g towards the equipment-covered center pillar scanning for Screammers. As he gently collided with a computer display and integrated control panel on the center pillar, Darkstar's hatch slide shut, its stealth coating transmitting the starfield beyond. A second later, the Erasmus's docking port closed too. To the Screammers on board, it would look like just another unused docking port.

Focused, his reactions primed, he swept the scene, his pistol like the rest of him, visible to only himself via his helmet display. Perched on the center pillar, movement caught his eye. Was there something emerging from the farthest docking port—the Skylon's berth? He closed one eye, zeroing in. Nothing. He held his breathing steady.

Was it real or was it adrenaline or just imagination?

He bided his time, ears trained for sounds front and behind. Just the sound of nearby airflow, the hum of electricity, a distant sonorous creaking. Then the slightest of vibrations foretold its coming as it emerged from the docking port—head first, snarling, an ear-splitting scream of anger, its face turned to face him. He paused, swallowing down hard, shocked by its look of pure evil—the razor teeth, the furrowed brow, the dark veined face with a strangely morbid complexion and those eyes... Killer's eyes, red and tortured, boring into his soul. It came straight towards him, its filthy, clawed hands outstretched. He fired. The high-pitched zip, zip of a suppressed double-tap to its head lost in the background noise. Two perfect holes in its forehead, dark red mist and fragments spraying from the back of its skull as the body rotated from the impact, still floating towards him. He awaited its arrival, looking aside the disgusting beast. He pushed it by the shoulders and it reversed course, floating languidly back from where it had come.

Now there was a body, he'd need to move fast. A piercing shriek came from the opposite direction, near the entrance to the first of the lab modules. This time two Screammers—one crossing the threshold, the other hanging, sneering in the hatchway. They paused and conversed in their hideous language, the one in the hatchway pointing its vicious hand at the corpse behind the invisible Rae. The other seemed to stare right at Rae, despite his transparency. The Screamer pulled himself towards Rae as the other one turned in the hatchway to summon others. Rae didn't wait. The last thing he needed was the entire horde converging on him. He fired twice: once into the fast-disappearing Screamer's back, the next into the advancing foe's eye, a dark, bloody hole replacing it. The first Screamer writhed, making otherworldly squeals while floating into the lab. Rae pushed off towards it, firing two more silenced rounds. The first missed, embedding with a sonorous clunk into something metallic and unseen. The second round glanced off the target's morose, hairless scalp taking part of the skull with it in a fireworks display of blood and bone.

If that lab's occupied I'll need to clean up fast, stop the alarm spreading, he thought, pulling himself several more times, faster still into the open hatchway.

The docking module he was exiting met the lab module at right angles midway along its length. Two new alien screams came from the lab, drowning out the thrum of the station. They must have seen the fleeing Screamer floating in, dead. Or maybe the fragments of cranium and gore from its head. Rae broke his flight and peeked his head through the hatchway, assessing left then right. He was in target acquisition mode, his eyes disregarding the complex array of equipment lining every part of the cylinder's curved wall. There they were: two Screamers to the left, both clad in white, the first the figure of a small woman, the other a slim, tall man. Both with a deadly stare. Both advancing on Rae's position ... or was it to their dead friend who'd floated into the lab? It was hard for him to tell with the corpse just a meter in front of him.

No reasoning with them, he decided, firing a single shot into the male's head, adrenaline snapping his aim in an instant to the female and giving her the same treatment.

Five down, ten to go and no station-wide alarm sounding yet.

Rae was a practiced and efficient killer. Those deemed enemies of the Renaissance deserved no mercy. He was a patriot to the core, the fundamental good of the new America's mission, and its way of life, learned through half a lifetime of service—first, in the US Army Infantry, then the US Army Rangers, then the American Union's Covert Action Group. The CAG was a combined Special Forces unit in which he'd risen to the rank of Captain, commanding his own company but often going solo. Assassinations of state enemies, sabotage, espionage—all were within scope for the loyal operative.

The second lab module saw four more targets neutralized.

Nine down, six to go.

In the third lab module, housing horticultural and biological experiments, he killed two more. Then he caught sight of something behind him in his peripheral vision. Movement. He turned quickly to see a Screamer emerge from inside some sort of glass cabinet, making for the hatch he'd recently entered through. This one was strangely silent, but a Screamer nevertheless. Then he realized he was wrong. It wasn't heading for the hatch at all but the thing on the wall beside it. It reached for the red emergency handle. Time slowed down. Rae raised his gun and fired. The hole in the foe's beastly left hand appeared all but instantaneously. But the right hand reached up and yanked down the emergency lever, engulfing him in the noise of a shrill alarm. Beacons flashed an urgent red strobe. He finished off the flight-suit-clad Screamer, damning the bastard for shitting on his plan. Then the hatches began to slide shut. The module with the sphere was just beyond the hatch opposite, its two-meter-wide aperture narrowing from the side as its sliding door closed. It wasn't closing fast, but it wasn't slow either. Rae kicked off a glass cabinet hard, cracking it, and propelling himself at the diminishing way-to-target. Mid-flight, he tucked in his arms, straightened his legs, wondering how strong the door servos were. Half a second before reaching the hatch he knew he'd slip through. As he tucked his head down to reduce his profile further, the last thing he caught sight of was the feet exiting the distant end of the large module, half a football field away. Once through the closing hatch, he scanned the scene—no sign of Screamers. He watched the far hatch close. At the same time, the hatch behind him *clunked* shut.

Trapped, damn it! Three enemy remaining. Alarms blaring. Element of surprise gone.

He knew Screamer reinforcements would come to the Erasmus eventually, but it wasn't like calling a police drone back home. Intel during the briefing had indicated three days until the next Skylon visit. The nearest responders were thought to be the Democratic Alliance's Earth Observatory, Gaia Station, in a completely different orbit. Center had said in the briefing that enemy launches from Earth *could* be dealt with,

but only if the mission was jeopardized. Not for the first time, that thought brought home to Rae how vital this mission was. To interdict an Alliance spaceplane was a risky action and hard to make deniable. Something close to the threshold for war. He wouldn't call in support lightly, that was for sure. And if he did, would it come, or would they just disown him? Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered if war was unavoidable given the spread of the Screamer parasite. It had caused fortress America to pull up the drawbridge and re-double biosecurity measures like never before. The real worry was the Badlands—the Military Operations Zone covering the lion's share of American territory. For sure, it was heavily patrolled, but it was a lawless place inhabited by millions of Illegals and terrorists. The Mexico and Canada border zones were heavily policed, its walls a triumph of American engineering. But it simply wasn't possible to cover the entire coastline, despite the best efforts of the military. No border was completely secure.

His thoughts snapped back to the here and now as he surveyed the cavernous module. The inside surface of the twenty-meter-wide cylinder were hidden by computer cabinets, displays, workstations and several transparent-walled rooms housing robotics apparatus. In the center of the module, around half the width and most of the length, was occupied by the sphere and its surrounding server-type cabinets of computer kit that he'd seen on the 3D rendering. The device was in the sphere, but it looked hewn from solid alloy, the six tubes entering orthogonally looked integrated, jointless and of the same gray metal. From those tubes, multiple smaller conduits emerged and connected the sphere tubes to the dozen or so cabinets surrounding it. Scanning around, something in one of the glass-walled rooms caught his eye. Twenty-something meters away—close to the mid-point of the module, on the right-hand wall, stood a bank of stainless-steel cabinets which reminded Rae of super-sized refrigerators. There was something else in the glass-walled room. Curiosity got the better of him—he pulled himself towards it, alert to danger, but sensing no threat. Grabbing onto the door handle, he decided to remain outside. If Screamers returned, he wanted a clear shot. Beyond the glass door, in the middle strapped to a specimen table, was the thing that had drawn him there. A human brain sliced clean in two, tethered scalpel floating nearby beside a hose that looked like a vacuum extractor. He snapped his head left. A faint clinking noise from behind the far hatch. It grew louder. Rae looked for the nearest cover and found it behind a server cabinet—part of the central sphere complex—placing it between him and the far hatch. He was still for all intents invisible, but part habit and part precaution drew him behind cover.

Concealment ain't the same thing as cover, boy! came the voice from his basic grunt training all those years ago.

He poked out his head, getting eyes on the far hatch, his pistol-wielding hand steady and ready. Then two things happened. First, the hatch began to open. Gradually, the white hatch slid aside to reveal the darkened place beyond. The rhythmic clanging continued to emanate from the same direction—now only louder. Then the second thing happened. Rae couldn't react fast enough. The hatch behind him was open, and inside, ten meters away were two large Screamers holding full-length ballistic shields. Their diabolical snarling faces filled the bullet-proof glass apertures near the top. Their reddened killer's eyes stared straight at him.

How the fuck? Where'd they get shields? Intel didn't say anything about that!

His stomach clenched tight, momentary shock suppressed. They hovered, anchored by the hatch, side-by-side offering a wall of impenetrable shield. But they didn't advance. Rae couldn't tell if they could somehow see him. The stealth suit wasn't perfect, sometimes betraying its user with a heat-haze-like silhouette.

Maybe Screamers' vision is better than ours, he thought.

The alarms and red strobing continued relentlessly, pouring forth more stress. They didn't seem armed—otherwise they'd have pulled their weapons already. So he decided to try something. Rae let go of the cabinet and pushed off gently towards, and to the right of, the Screamers. He observed their eyes. First, they didn't track him. Then they *did*, following his exact path.

Fuck.

The right-hand Screamer extended his hand, pointing something at Rae.

Energy weapon? Taser?

He didn't wait to find out and fired twice, smashing whatever it was from its hand, sending it behind the shield and taking off two clawed fingers in the process. Then the Screamer made a mistake, releasing the shield and turning for the exit. Rae got him twice in the back. Now just five meters and side-on to the second Screamer, its flank was exposed.

Easy pickings! thought Rae, as he swiftly planted two more in the once-human.

Their bodies floated limply nearby the open hatch. Rae caught his breath. If the intel was right, there was just one left on the station. His retrieval work would be a lot easier with *zero* left.

Their fate was sealed the moment they let me in, he thought, considering the fact this was a civilian installation, armory or not.

He might have had some misgivings if these were humans, but these *things* ceased to be people when the parasite had co-opted them. He pulled himself close to the floating dead, detritus and droplets of blood from their wounds spreading like a cloud of death. He wanted to check out the weapon the Screamer had pointed at him. Nearing the corpse, he pushed it and the shield aside looking for the weapon. All that greeted him were weapon fragments, the largest of which looked like part of a casing—a once-rectangular, plastic shell with half a broken circuit board still affixed to it. It couldn't have been a firearm—maybe a Taser as he'd suspected.

Makes sense, he thought, given the fragility of the pressurized station.

He didn't have the same concern with his own hollow point rounds—bad for Screamers, good for space stations.

Screamers looked bad enough in life and even worse dead, so he was keen to call time on searching the area. There was the sphere to take and it sat less than twenty meters away. But a single enemy remained if the intel was correct. He scanned around, listening carefully—no sign of it nearby. There was a decision to make: get to work on extracting the sphere or hunt the Screamer. The thought of the possible armory and the way they seemed to track his position, despite his stealth suit, made his mind up—the Screamer had to die first.

Rae set off moving cover-to-cover, module-to-module. He flew through more labs, an accommodation module, recreation and exercise rooms and the command module, but found nothing. He managed to shut off the station's alarm and emergency strobe lighting, bringing relief to his senses. He flew another circuit around the station, scanning each module, listening and observing, silently drifting like an apparition. He found no Screamer. No evidence of it. No sound of a living thing—just electrical, mechanical and structural sounds of the SS Erasmus. He hung in mid-air thinking, anchored to a fixture in the corner of the docking module. An idea came to him. He re-entered the Darkstar capsule via the hatch, sat in the command seat and summoned Darkstar's computer with his thoughts.

Darkstar, attempt a hack of the Erasmus's internal security cameras

“Welcome back, Captain,” said the Darkstar's computer. “Initiating hack...”

A short pause, then, "Connection established. Hack successful."

Darkstar, display all internal camera feeds. Monitor feeds for Screamers.

His mind's eyes simultaneously saw all forty-eight surveillance feeds, while the Darkstar's computer watched the same. He decided to give it a while before going back for the primary objective: extraction of the sphere.

His enhancements kicked in after five minutes, allowing crisp concentration in the face of little of interest. Fifteen minutes passed. Then there was movement. A Screamer—checking out the two dead with the shields. He couldn't see the face, but from the body shape and the floating, collar-length blonde hair, this one had been a small, slim woman. He exited Darkstar, cutting the close-range mind-link, and flew at a furious pace to the beast's last known location.

Easy prey!

Through the dock, then the two smaller labs and into the third. Then he saw the blue-flight-suit-clad figure inside the sphere's module. It darted to the side, behind the hatchway. It seemed to sense his arrival. And Rae had noticed something else—it held a device just as the last one had. He raised his pistol and moved towards the open hatch. As he drew close, a hand appeared from the side of the hatchway, and in it was the device. Before Rae could fire, a dazzling red light flickered to life, engulfing his vision. He willed his gun to fire. Nothing happened. Then his world went black.

The object of life is not to be on the side of the majority, but to escape finding oneself in the ranks of the insane.

Marcus Aurelius

Rae emerged slowly from his dreamless blackout. The bright lighting overhead dazzled his eyes, adding to his throbbing headache. He steadied his breathing, quickly assessing that he was still suited, viewing the world via his helmet display. He tried to move but couldn't. He strained to lift his arm against some constraining force and realized he was tied to the stainless-steel table in one of the glass-walled rooms in the L2 module. There was something else too. Something about his own stealth-suited body. He was mostly visible. Covered in what looked like a rushed spray-paint job in a dull shade of gray. The steel table below him showed through the untarnished stealth coating in random slivers and patches untouched by the paint. And not only had he lost stealth but his sidearm was missing, the curly tether floating loosely from his hip. His headache began to fade, to be replaced by a sinking feeling in his gut. What else could they have done to his suit? If there was a breach or they'd messed with the re-breather, then parasite spores might already be inside his body. If that happened, then he'd rather be dead. Accessing his visor HUD with thought, he did a status check.

Battlesuit integrity: 100%

Rebreather operating state: Normal

Breathing a sigh of momentary relief, he knew he was still in trouble. His eyes darted around as he moved his head scanning the scene—no sign of the Screamer, no sound but for the station itself. An unhealthy odor was just detectable. He assumed it was coming from the two corpses still floating near the hatchway, although he could only discern their presence in his peripheral vision. A surge of motivation grew, the fog of unconsciousness now gone. He strained against his restraints—first the arms and then the legs. No-go.

“Shit!” he whispered, teeth gritted.

He still had no idea what the Screamer had pointed at him and why he'd blacked out. It must've been some neural-interference weapon—probably of alien origin. He'd never heard of the Alliance deploying something that could render someone unconscious like that. Sure, there was knock-out gas and sedative rounds and electrical devices, but his suit protected against all those threats. This was a pulsing red light. Now his headache had gone, he recalled something else. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he felt somehow *different*. Something had changed. Memories from his past kept randomly entering his consciousness. Much clearer than before. Not of the recent past but from years back, from the time before he'd become an American Union citizen. Of his days in New Zealand, his parents, long-forgotten childhood friends. He tried to focus on his predicament, accessing his suit's log via thought. The events log scrolled onto the helmet HUD, the video feed of his glass cell the back-drop. He'd been out for just over three hours. One of the last entries—corresponding to the time of the last Screamer contact—was telling. An electromagnetic pulse or EMP registered by his suit's sensors.

A woman's voice over a nearby PA speaker broke his train of thought. Scared. Traumatized. Foreign-accented. German.

“Don't try to escape,” she said. “I'll vent the module if you try anything!”

He angled his head up, towards the source. Her face filled the integrated display on the bulkhead. The background was dark, but the points of light and faint glow from nearby computer monitors illuminated the scene enough to tell him she was in the command module. She was early-fifties, collar-length, ashen hair, strands floating around her face, her light blue eyes reddened and swollen like she'd been crying. Kind eyes. A lined face, telling of past happiness. No sign of her being a Screamer. He continued to examine her dimly-lit features: well-defined, hearted-shaped with high-cheekbones. He needed to be sure. The fifteen intervening years and gloomy lighting had done its best to conceal her identity. But there was no mistaking it: he knew her.

Doctor Stephanie Muller had tutored Rae as an undergrad at UCLA where he read Mechanical Engineering with Computer Science. He couldn't remember from where in Germany she hailed but knew she'd have had a choice to make in 2075—the year after the Renaissance. All *qualifying* foreigners—or part-foreigners, like himself—had been given a choice. Become a citizen, renouncing any foreign citizenships, or leave. Rae's father was a US Citizen, his mother was from New Zealand, where he was born. As a dual-national, he had this choice to make. He'd spent his youth and entire adult life in America and had been on active service for eight years. He'd married Cora a year prior. His life was in America. He renounced his New Zealand citizenship and stayed. Millions of *non-qualifying* foreigners were given a week to leave or be designated Illegals. After the Sanctuaries Act of 2077, many of the same people became fair game in the Badlands, away from the gleaming, walled cities in which Citizens lived relatively privileged lives. Some Illegals opted to become Serviles—mindchipped and subservient to their employers but fed and clothed and safe from the horrors of the Badlands and the failed states to the south. Dr Muller would've had a choice too, given her skillset and standing. Clearly, she'd declined if she was working on an Alliance research facility. He'd been twenty when he'd first met Dr Muller at college, she had been late-thirties. He couldn't forget the mutual attraction. The flirting, eye contact during private tutoring, always-on smile when he was around pretty much meant the green light as far his young-man mind could tell. As a tall, tanned and handsome guy with a muscular, athletic physique, he had no shortage of interest from others. But nothing had come of it with Dr Muller. And besides, he was in love with someone else at the time. Or what he thought was love and had turned out not to be. Dr Muller was still an attractive woman—that was plain, even in her current distraught state.

There were so many questions buzzing around his mind. About Muller herself. About the Erasmus. About how the Arrival had affected them. About why she wasn't a Screamer yet in a space station full of them? Had they discovered a new vaccine or something to reverse the parasite's effects? He knew identifying himself would aid intel extraction but doing that would be completely against protocol. If he didn't get out of the binds and to Dr Muller, showing his identity might be the only way. And not just for intel gathering's sake. It might be the only way to *survive*. The only hint she may pick up on would be his voice. Using thoughts, he commanded the suit to engage voice disguise. When he spoke, his voice would take on a higher pitched, a less gravelly tone—unthreatening.

"It's okay, ma'am," he said reassuringly, "no need to vent the module. I'm not here to harm you—only Screamers."

He could see her fighting back the tears. She took a long, full breath, before exhaling slowly, controlled.

"How did you get here? Who *sent* you? What the hell do you *want*? Screamers?" she said hysterically, struggling to control herself.

She started shaking. To Rae, she looked on the edge of breakdown.

“Look, I know this is traumatic,” he said, trying again to work his legs free. “I have to tell you: there are more of us. You need to release me. I promise you won’t be harmed.”

She’d used plastic cable ties. Chunky ones too and damned tight. They were looped through something solid below the table he was on. Whatever it was, he hoped rubbing the cable ties would wear them enough to break them without alerting her. He guessed she could only see his helmet and shoulders, but couldn’t be sure.

She shook her head, not buying it.

“Oh no... No way!”

“Maybe you don’t call them *Screamers*... Look, just tell me why you’re still human? Is it something to do with your research? Something to do with that... that *weapon* you fired at me—the thing with the red light that knocked me out?”

“You’re crazy!” she screamed before sobbing, still shaking.

She reached up and pulled herself out of camera shot, the display now showing the dim command module.

“Hey, it’s ok!” he called. “Come back!”

Shit. Who knows what she’ll do in her state of mind? he thought.

Images flashed of her returning with a big knife and getting to work on him strapped to the specimen table. Or worse: exposing him to the spores. That thought drove him to redouble escape efforts. The rubbing of the arm and leg binds reached a furious pace. Then he stopped, the decision made. There was no point trying to hide his escape efforts if she was coming for him. Using thought-control he cranked up the power to the suit’s artificial muscles, not bothering to confine it to the arms and legs. It didn’t make him Superman, but it multiplied his already considerable strength, loudly snapping the cable-ties in short order. As the release sent him floating upwards, he switched off the strength function and flew out through the open glass door and behind the sphere and its surrounding server cabinets. He listened and scanned. No sight, no sound. With no weapon, and with no desire to kill Dr Muller anyway, *she* had the upper hand. He paused, trying to understand *why* he didn’t want to kill her. After all, it was a mission objective. *No survivors*. Familiar face or not, Screamer or not, the mindchip shouldn’t allow such a deviation. He shook his head. No time to rationalize. It was her home turf and she had that damned red-light weapon, whatever the hell it was. He couldn’t let her incapacitate him again, so he returned to glass room he’d just left and grabbed a scalpel, complete with protective sheath and stowed it in his side leg pocket. He wouldn’t need it close-up, but if it came to it, he’d use it as a throwing knife. The thought saddened him. He knew and had liked Dr Muller immensely but still couldn’t understand why he was thinking so sentimentally. Whatever she’d fired at him felt like it’d done something to his mind, screwed him up somehow. Those weak-minded thoughts would only make the job harder. He expunged them and flew hard, distancing himself, seeking concealment. He needed to plan his next move. He thought about Darkstar. But it was too risky. If she tracked him there, then his escape would be revealed. Darkstar wasn’t the sole means of escape—there was the Skylon possibility and the station’s emergency pods. But Darkstar was the best means. Certain. Reliable. Deniable. Who knew if he could hack the Skylon spaceplane or pods before they locked them down remotely?

He reached the accommodation module—a cluttered space of sleeping pods, a fabric-sided shower cubical and some lockers. The tight environs of the station helped his cause, putting less distance between him and the doc should she try again with that knock-out gun. He’d flown a circuit though half the stations, now just

a closed hatch separated him from the command module where he'd last seen her. He unzipped the shower cubical and got inside, quietly re-fastening the door flap. Time to think.

He assumed ground control had been notified when the station's alarm went off. And there was no doubt Dr Muller would've call in with the details once she'd tied him up. So, taking out comms wasn't the top priority—it was getting to Dr Muller. If she didn't have her knock-out gun, he'd have gone straight for the primary target—the device. But she did, and he couldn't. Yet. Unless the Screamer-originators—the aliens that had sent the Screamer parasite—had some undetected space assets, he knew the enemy cavalry wouldn't be there for a while. There was no evidence for such an alien presence near Earth. The theory was that the aliens had sent the small, interstellar vessel with the parasite so they didn't have to expend the massive resources that an invasion force would demand. That armada might come in future, once the humans-turned-Screamers had taken over Earth. So he waited, biding his time, letting her make a move. It was what he'd gotten good at during his time in the military, even more so in Special Forces. Twitchiness and indiscipline were killers in situations like this.

It wasn't long—just minutes—when there came a *clang* from the adjacent command model; next came an electrical humming and a *clank*. The sounds compelled investigation. After easing down the shower cubicle zip, he slipped out and towards the hatch to the command module. Opening the hatch, he slid gingerly into the command module where his fears were confirmed. There was her face, scared, peering at him through the porthole of the escape pod. He held the handhold by the escape pod's hatch, his body floating weightlessly, his reflection in the glass. He regarded himself momentarily. His visor, rendered visible by a rough coat of spray-paint, cast a sinister, warrior visage. The urge to pull off his helmet and establish some human contact nearly overcame him. But it didn't. Spores would be everywhere. Not a risk worth taking.

“Please let me go,” she said, her voice distant, attenuated by the pod.

Her pleading confirmed something to him: there *was* a way to stop her. But he didn't want to do it by force but through words.

“If you tell me what I need to know... Please... I just need to complete my mission, that's all,” he said, overlooking that *no survivors* was part of it.

There were times when he wanted to do the right thing, but darker thoughts usually appeared from his subconscious, derailing his goodwill. He didn't understand why and wondered if there was a craziness in him, uncontrollable, at times malign. Still he couldn't shake the feeling that ever since awakening from the blackout a weight had been lifted. It was how he used to feel—less intense, more trusting... freer.

“I'll tell you what I can.”

He gave a curt nod. “What's in the sphere?”

“It's classified. I... I really can't answer that”

“Come on, we have a deal. Tell them I threatened you. They'll understand.”

Her head dropped, she exhaled then straightened up, looked right at him.

“It's a computer.”

“What kind of computer?”

She paused, internal conflict seemingly making a last stand. After a few of seconds, she sighed, relenting.

“Ok, ok... It's a prototype AI called ASTRA.”

“ASTRA? An artificial intelligence?”

She nodded, her face glum.

“Why build it here? Why not on Earth?”

“It’s part biological—very fragile... Delicate. Requires microgravity to build. We constructed the sphere around it to—”

“Take it to the surface, right?”

“Yes, right.”

“Next question—”

“Why did you come here? Why did you *kill* them?”

“Look... I ask, you answer. Got it?”

She nodded nervously.

“How do I remove ASTRA without damaging it?”

She explained how, continuing to hold up her end of the deal.

“Now tell me about the alien parasite. To what extent—”

“Alien parasite? What are you *talking* about?”

He paused, thinking why she’d deny such a self-evident fact. In that moment it also bothered him that the face he saw was someone he knew.

What are the odds of that? he thought. *Could it be the last Screamer had somehow manipulated him into believing it was a human? And a human he’d once known? Is that what the red-light device was for?*

He peered as closely as the porthole would allow, searching for aberrations, tell-tales that her face was an illusion. Nothing. He’d had enough of her stalling.

“Don’t deny it. *Screamers*. The Arrival, three years ago!... Come on, you’ve done well so far—don’t mess up now. Don’t make me—”

“Listen to me—if the device I used on you worked you will see...”

“See *what?*” he said, shaking his head dismissively, showing her his palm. “Just quit with the BS. Just—just shut up. Please, just...”

His voice trailed off. He needed to think.

The device, the red light... Maybe the enemy’s used it to trick my mind. Has it somehow manipulated my visuals, made the Screamer in front of me look human? I mean, what’s the chances of someone I know being the first human I see up here? Alliance bastards... Can’t trust ‘em!

Then it happened. Her hand yanked something below, sending her tumbling backwards into the pod. A *whoosh* followed as the pod’s inner door slammed shut. Rae reflexively pushed himself away. Instantaneously, a repeating alert sounded, followed by a recorded message over the PA.

“Emergency pod release initiated. Ejection in ten, nine...”

He returned to the porthole. Dr Muller was now strapped into one of the seats facing him.

“Call off the launch, ma’am!” he shouted above the count-down.

“Six, five...”

Observing through her through the glass, she bowed her head, shaking, cutting off any vestige of contact.

“Two, one...”

He stared, eyes wide.

“Pod release successful.”

The capsule slid away revealing the majesty of Earth below, Dr Muller’s face transfixed on him, framed by the porthole. He guessed for her it was a relief, but her face just showed sadness. Multiple, complex, rapid puffs of propellant rotated the pod, heatshield now prograde, obscuring the Erasmus’s sole survivor.

He’d surprised himself in his equanimity. Logic, not to mention orders, dictated he should have tried to terminate Muller immediately he had the chance. He couldn’t do it though. His fondness for her had stopped him. Sentimental weakness still resided somewhere deep within him. Maybe she’d reminded him of a time before events had shaped him. Before he had joined the US Army. Before he took what he’d later find out was the Citizenship Pill. He gritted his teeth. Right when he’d concluded she wasn’t Dr Muller at all—that it was a trick—she’d escaped! He should’ve opened fire whether he’d recognized her or not. The resistance he’d felt to killing her worried him. Dispassionate execution of orders made him an effective operative, gave him purpose and pride. The training, the belief they’d instilled in him about national primacy in a world of foes all made him... *him*. And, of course, the mind enhancements implanted in his brain in 2076 as part of the Army’s Biological Upgrade Program. The post-Renaissance, American Union armed forces had few of the qualms of the US military. He could communicate directly with computers, recall facts, visualize things photographically, access a world of information. He tried to pull up schematics of the Erasmus—the detailed engineering drawings of the sphere and the system to which it was attached. Intel had somehow gotten their hands on these and uploaded them to him during the briefing. Nothing. He tried again, but his mind drew a blank. Whatever that escaping Screamer—masquerading as Dr Muller—had done to him had screwed up his mind.

The escape pod was now a speck against the radiant deserts of North Africa and Arabia.

He’d seen no evidence of anyone else—Screamer or human—so he flew quickly into the adjacent L2 module and cast his eyes over the sphere, surprised again at his foggy recall of so-called-Muller’s removal instructions. She’d only cooperated up until the point she’d worked out how to release the pod without him noticing. He had no choice but to take it step-by-step and follow her instructions as far as he could remember. He worked fast, shutting down the sphere via the controls on one of the server cabinets. Then, after locating a toolkit, he unbolted the flanged connections on the tubes connecting sphere to cabinets. After easing the tubes’ plugs from the sphere’s internal sockets, he retrieved the aperture covers and installed them on the sphere as so-called-Muller had advised. Hundreds of golden connector pins sat on the face of each tube’s plug. Finally, he released the sphere from its tethers, floating it clear of the cramped confines of the computer hub. Initially surprised by its inertia, he floated the satin gray sphere through the station to the dock, paying no attention to the Screamer corpses floating statically against bulkheads and equipment. He needed all his focus for guiding the sphere through the hatches without collision. With the sphere floating nearby, he opened Darkstar’s hatch, before easing it gently through with just millimeters to spare. Once he’d swaddled the cargo in strapping, he exited Darkstar. There was still work to do.

He returned to the command module and disconnected the station’s network from the communications array, severing its link with ground control. Next, with a sturdy claw hammer from the toolkit, he levered open a metal cover below the main display panels. An interface probe telescoped from the left wrist of his suit and mated with the now-uncovered data port. Using the suit’s integrated computer, he accessed the Erasmus’s Reaction Control System. He programmed a full-power retrograde burn with no *stop* instruction. The station’s

thrusters would eject monopropellant until exhausted, slowing it down, degrading its orbit. Aerobraking would take over and until the Earth's atmosphere claimed it during burn-up.

"RCS firing in ten, nine..."

He got to work with the hammer's claw, opening metal covers until he found the primary hard-drives. He removed them and placed them in the small pouch below his rebreather.

"Three, two, one. RCS firing retrograde on full power."

Immediately, he began drifting away from the main display as the Erasmus decelerated. Its altitude would drop. The tenuous upper atmosphere would start aerobraking on its massive surface area, friction exciting air molecules at orbital velocity. It would start as a gentle glow, end as a furious burn. That would take some time. But without ground control, it'd be before the station could be reached. He took a breath—the first moment of respite since he'd encountered the Muller lookalike in the pod. She... *it*, was the only loose end. His work was almost done. Soon he'd be back at base, debriefed and some well-earned R&R with Cora. He turned and pulled himself through the hatchway and made his way through the large L2 module from where he'd taken ASTRA.

When he saw it his jaw dropped. He'd have rubbed his eyes in disbelief but for the helmet.

"What the *hell*?"

His mind staggered. His stomach lurched.

"It *cannot* be... I—I saw its face with my own eyes!"

He floated closer to the two corpses he'd shot by the hatchway. Globules of blood floated nearby, more blood on the nearby bulkhead. Only one of their faces was visible. He inhaled, hoping against hope and turned the other one to see its face.

"No..."

When he'd shot them, he'd only seen Screamers. The faces staring lifelessly back at him were not. They were human faces. Without thought, he removed his helmet, ignoring the risk of spores, wanting to see directly with his own eyes. A blue-eyed man, blond curly hair, thirtysomething. A dark-skinned woman around the same age. Her large brown eyes seemed to stare deep into his soul, driving home the shock and confusion. He replaced his helmet. He felt numb, his mind was spinning as he floated through the house of death. Every time he stared at a new face, turned over another body, a fresh charge of dissonant horror coursed through him. Fourteen civilians. Scientists, engineers, astronauts. Sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers... All but defenseless. All human.

He didn't know why it had affected him so much. Surely, if his theory was right—that the red-light device had been a trick to make him see Screamers as still human—why was he so distressed? Even if they were human, he'd have had no difficulty just accepting he'd neutralized them. Civilian or not. Unarmed or not. He needed to find out. He released the gauntlet covering his left hand and pushed off towards the small woman he'd shot dead in the first lab. There she was, clad in a white one-piece flight suit, the strands of her strawberry blonde hair not tied back doing their delicate dance around her lifeless freckled face. Suspended motionless in micro-gravity, she lay diagonally, her clear, dead eyes staring at nothingness. Sweat rolled down his brow, his hand shaking as he reached out to touch her cheek. He paused, anticipating the dissonance between the smooth, youthful skin he saw, and the scaly Screamer hide he expected to feel. He ran his ungloved fingers over her cheek. Cold to the touch. Slack, lacking the muscle tone. But human skin. He stroked her hair—soft, human

hair, not the leathery scalp of a Screamer. His heart sank, his mouth hung ajar. There was no mistaking it. He'd just killed a station full of uninfected humans. And what was more, he felt terrible about it. He felt *remorse*. A remorse he knew only from distant memories that he'd forgotten he'd even had.

Who am I? What have I become?

A monster, replied the conscience in his head.

Still reeling, less than a minute later, he strapped into Darkstar-One overcome with shock. With both the capsule and his thoughts on autopilot, Darkstar detached from the ghost ship Erasmus. The doomed station slipped away, its thrusters venting propellant into the half-light above Earth. The Alliance would detect no departure—the remaining escape pod and the docked Skylon would go down with the ship. With no comms link to the station and no station, the Alliance's intelligence services would be left guessing at how—and even whether—the enemy agent reported by Dr Muller had escaped. He was pretty sure they would assume the worst. What counted for his masters though was deniability. With it, the American-Democratic Alliance conflict would remain a shadow war of spooks and cyberattacks. Without deniability, his deeds would not go publicly unpunished. The chance of the cold war becoming hot would get one step closer.

Darkstar: initiate re-entry burn at a displacement of 120 kilometers.

“Re-entry burn countdown initiated,” the computer voiced to his mind. “Monitoring displacement from Erasmus.”

The invisible Darkstar would continue drifting away from the decelerating Erasmus. He needed to sit tight and wait until nowhere near the scene of the crime before his retro-burn and re-entry. He'd appreciated the distraction of being busy, but now his tasks had run dry for the time being. Now he was alone again with his thoughts.

He looked down—dusk over the American Union, its Sanctuary Cities beacons of light amongst the hopeless Badlands full of so-called Illegals and terrorists and criminals. Most travel between Sanctuary Cities was via plane or by heavily-guarded convoys of platooned freight trucks. There were no tendrils of light where the former Interstates ran—just islands of light in a sea of darkness. So different was the view of Europe across the Atlantic—points of light dotted across the land, away from the main cities, along coasts, in countryside and major transit corridors.

Visions of those he'd slain kept returning despite his efforts to quell his inner demons. He'd seen and felt enough to sow the seeds of doubt. Doubt about the mindchip. Doubt about the Regime. Doubt about his entire reality. Had the cybernetic circuitry in his mind been feeding him lies all along, masking civilians as Screamers? Was it augmented reality, manipulating him into committing unspeakable acts? What else was a lie? As he stared down at the world—still mostly corrupt and poor as it always was—other ill deeds started as a trickle but became a flood. Ill deeds he'd been a part of. Villages massacred in Africa. Countless so-called Illegals and so-called terrorists executed just for being in the Badlands. Hunted like animals. Had the neural implant somehow suppressed these memories? Suppressed normal feelings of resistance to violence, feelings of remorse? Had the red-light device re-programmed the mindchip making him see a different reality? A tear formed in his eye and rolled down his cheek. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cried. Before long he couldn't stop crying.

Eventually the tears ceased but he felt nauseous. He tried to rationalize—no way could he return to Earth in this state. He recalled something he'd once read. Einstein, he thought.

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

An idea came to him. An idea that brought fresh hope that this was all a misunderstanding. That it *was* a station full of Screamers and not civilians after all.

What if Dr Muller's manipulation made me not just see them as humans, but feel human skin, human hair?

He wanted to deny the new reality his senses now revealed—it was horrifying if it was true. But couldn't shake the feeling that he'd reverted to a more natural state of mind. Beneath the shock and the guilt and the nausea, he'd began to feel more... more like *himself*. Freer. If the mindchip had not only enhanced him but made him see an augmented reality to manipulate him, then the corollary was terrifying. Had his own people removed his agency and made him do their bidding or had he been tricked by a foreign power in the grip of an existential alien parasite? His superiors would know something was wrong—to what degree, he didn't know. If he told them what had happened and it was an Alliance trick, then he could go back to doing what he did and feeling great about it. But what if his whole life was a lie and Dr Muller had just freed his mind? Then what? He knew what the easiest thing would be, the path of least resistance. He wiped away the tears and breathed several deep breaths, staving off the desire to puke. An unusually clear image of his father came to mind. Suddenly he was a little boy again, kneeling beside the wood fire at home in New Zealand as he studied the chess board on the coffee table, his dad walking back in with two steaming mugs, jazz playing quietly in the background.

“What's your next move, Cal?” said his dad, placing the mug of hot chocolate beside the board.

“From here... to here, Dad,” said the seven-year-old Rae, indicating a two-space pawn advance.

His dad sat on the comfy chair, opposite his little boy, smiled, quizzical look on his face.

“Why did you decide on *that* move, Cal?”

Young Rae shrugged. He was tired from rugby practice, enjoying the occasion but not putting much thought into his strategy.

“Well?” asked Dad.

“I dunno... Just easy, I guess.”

His dad *tutted*, chuckled a little.

“What's the difference between those who succeed and those who never amount to much?”

Young Cal had heard this so many times that he knew it by heart. He recited it impatiently.

“Those who succeed do what they *need* to do, not just what they *want* to do.”

His father smiled, gave an approving nod.

The image evaporated and Rae was back in Darkstar-One hurtling around the planet, his estranged mom and dad somewhere far below, back in his old country.

He knew what he *wanted* to do. He also thought he knew what he *needed* to do. But he didn't know if he would do it.

Artificial intelligence is the future... for all humankind. It comes with colossal opportunities, but also threats that are difficult to predict. Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world.

Vladimir Putin

Eighteen hours after Rae's exfiltration, the Erasmus burnt up over the Indian Ocean. Only charred fragments of it reached the water. A day later, Darkstar-One re-entered the Earth's atmosphere to be plucked from the air high above the Military Operations Zone of the American Union. Rae, and Darkstar-One containing the ASTRA AI, rode inside the specially adapted Pegasus transport aircraft of the AU Airforce, touching down at Joint Base McKinnon in what used to be Texas, now deep within the Badlands. Biosecurity protocol forced him to stay cooped up in his capsule until the decontamination team had blasted every conceivable surface—including his stealth suit—with their fumigation spray. He didn't mention that he'd removed his helmet and his gauntlet inside the Erasmus. Maybe the whole biosecurity thing guarding against the so-called alien parasite was a charade. Lies and illusion. If it wasn't, then there was a good chance he was infected and would show signs over the coming days. A shudder ran through him at the thought of turning Screamer.

People in biohazard suits led him to the decontamination room, removing his battlesuit for cleansing and post-op forensics. They'd go through everything—the data it'd gathered, every square inch of its surface, run through its diagnostics, check its function. They left him in the spartan, white space to strip and place his clothing into a plastic container ready for collection. He appreciated the activity, the busyness, respite from his troubled mind, which had plagued his journey back. Now he was alone again, the pressure of acting normally had been replaced by resurgent thoughts. He trudged into the chilly, white-tiled shower. It detected his presence and the initially-cold water made him gasp as it sprayed from the ceiling head and all three of the shower's walled sides. The water now warm and pleasant, he caught his breath and pumped out a handful of cleanser and began on his buzz-cut hair, working the lather down over his lean, muscular body. Continuing on autopilot, a now-familiar sinking feeling returned. He sighed, shaking his head, mouth down-turned. The darkness before him seemed all encompassing. The sun of hope had gone, a winter of despair had set it. Why wouldn't the remorse go away? Why was it there in the first place? Ugly memories of past operations had been cut free from the murky seabed of his mind, breached the stormy surface and now floated like an ominous, ghostly armada of sin before him. The commercial flight from Madrid to Moscow he'd bombed, killing over three hundred people. Someone they wanted dead was on board, but he had no idea *why* or what the guy had supposedly done. The memory of it wasn't new. The only thing that was knew was how it made him feel. Now he recalled their faces. Faces from the departure gate, the young family walking into the air-bridge—two small girls decked out in pink and purple, holding hands, giggling, walking two-by-two in front of their mom and dad. Walking to their deaths. Rae doubled over and vomited violently, hands on his knees.

Scant punishment for all you've done, part of his mind told him.

All the time spent rationalizing while awaiting re-entry came to naught. His emotions, once a well-drilled troop of cavalry, were now running amok, a band of wild horses charging through his mind. One thing he knew for sure: he needed it to stop. He couldn't stand it anymore. But he couldn't face the thought of living a lie

either. Claspings at hair too short to grab, he looked to the heavens and growled a suppressed roar of angst to a god he wished he believed in.

Two hours after arriving, he was showered and shaved, his medical check completed, in fresh uniform and sitting alone in the brightly-lit debriefing room nearby the hangar. He heard footsteps approaching.

His commanding officer arrived first. Major Donald Warwick, commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion of the Covert Action Group. Rae got to his feet, snapping to attention. No salutes indoors.

“Hail President White! Hail the Renaissance! Freedom Through Struggle!” barked Rae.

Rae’s imposing physical presence surpassed his bald, middle-aged superior in height and build.

He stepped closer, bringing to bear a tight smile, offering his hand.

“At ease.”

They shook hands.

“Great job up there, soldier!”

“Thank you, sir.”

Major Warwick directed him to be seated as he leant against the desk at the front of the debriefing room.

The major paused, sizing up his operative. Rae felt the officer’s eyes examining him, processing what he saw, seeking out clues to the turmoil in his soldier’s head.

“Everything ok, Rae?”

Rae cleared his throat, nodded.

“Yessir, I believe the mission went mostly to plan.”

He hung his head, eyes downcast, before realizing and correcting his posture.

Warwick averted his stare and continued.

“The battlesuit techs have debriefed me,” said Warwick. “And we have your report from orbit.”

“Yessir.”

“The suit’s recorded data stops abruptly when a Screamer points a device at you.”

“Makes sense, sir,” he said. “It should be at around the same time I blacked out. An EMP weapon of some sort was my assessment, sir.”

Warwick gave a curt nod.

“Could be. We have our best people working on it, Captain. Their investigation will uncover all there is to know.”

Rae fidgeted, eyes darting around until he realized it.

The major broke into another one of his uncomfortable grins, his head shaking in admiration.

“Hats off to you, Rae—you really handed the enemy their ass on a plate. Recovering ASTRA, taking down their primary space asset and a whole bunch of Screamers with it... Oh, and intel from the hard-drives—wealth of knowledge, son.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Rae didn’t know where this was going, but the knot in his stomach told him Warwick was building up to something.

“But if you’d indulge me, Captain... there is one thing...” he said with a quizzical look on his face.

His eyes met Rae's. "Your suit registered only *fourteen* kills—Intel was *positive* there were *fifteen* bogies..."

Rae paused, composing himself. This felt like a test.

"That's incorrect, sir. There *were* fifteen. The final kill was made after that Screamer fired the EMP."

A lie. He hadn't seen the lie coming.

Warwick's poker face remained.

His tone neutral, he said, "So, after the EMP—after the suit stopped recording? Is that correct?"

Rae nodded.

"So how did you terminate the last Screamer?"

"I regained consciousness; I located it and broke its neck, sir."

Another lie. One lie leading to another, leading him down a path.

"Right. Because your weapon is missing..."

"Yessir. I couldn't locate it after being knocked out."

"Last footage from the suit's camera shows that EMP gun pointed right at you, Captain. How do you think that Screamer knew you were there? I mean, your stealth function was active, wasn't it?"

"Yessir, stealth was on."

"So?"

"I can't explain that, sir... I have some theories, but—"

"What are those *theories*?"

"Well... it's either that some blood splatter partially covered the suit rendering me visible or the Screamers have some sense or tech that we don't know about, sir."

The menace of parasite exposure returned to Rae at the thought of blood splatter.

Major Warwick looked at him, skeptically at first, but then nodded as though satisfied by his explanations. He eased up on the interrogation-style, his intensity waning. Rae ran him through the rest of the mission. He knew the whole conversation was being filmed and analysts would pore over it later.

"Well Captain, I'm pleased to say Tracking says that Darkstar's re-entry went undetected, pick up by Pegasus was clean, and the rest we know," concluded the major.

From the shuffle of feet and the familiar southern drawl, Rae could tell who it was nearing the closed briefing room door. He got to his feet. His stomach lurched. For reasons unknown, the man approaching filled him with dread. The door swung open and through strode the right-hand man of the president, General Gordon C. Hood, his uniformed female aide in tow. The rest of the entourage waited outside.

"General Hood!" announced the officious-looking, platinum-haired soldier-aide. Rae guessed she was thirtysomething but found it hard to tell on account of her flawless, synthetic perfection—commonplace in the American Union wherever there was money and influence. It disturbed Rae as he stole glances at her. Again, he was noticing new things.

Probably a conscripted Servile, he thought, wondering who she used to be before she'd been enslaved. But he knew no one should look that android-like. A superficially-attractive machine. A tool to be used. An object to be owned. He felt queasy again.

He clenched his abdominals, doing all he could to stay disciplined. Rae and the major snapped to attention, eyes on the diminutive general, his dark moustache and side-parted dark hair impeccably presented.

“Hail President White! Hail the Renaissance! Freedom Through Struggle!” they both recited.

Hood sized up the larger men one after the other saying nothing; his dark questioning eyes settled on Rae. Was it a show of dominance or admiration? He couldn't tell.

“At ease, gentlemen,” said General Hood calmly, coming over and shaking Rae's hand.

The cold, exposed metal of Hood's robotic hand clenched firmly and precisely. No crushing, no limpness. Nothing but the best in prosthetics for the elite. It served as a momentary distraction from Rae's demons.

“Excellent work, Captain. President White appreciates everything you've done for your country. We'll see to it you're rewarded appropriately. Take a seat, Captain.”

“Thank you, sir—it's my honor.”

The general joined Major Warwick, leading beside him against the desk at the front. The female aide stood watchfully in the corner behind Rae. He had an idea what sort of reward would be on offer in addition to his usual mission bonuses. In the past, he'd turned them down and that was something he was glad of. The thought of prestige rewards like exclusive club memberships, material rewards like private transport drones never appealed much anyway. Another common reward was people. Serviles. Now, the thought of owned Serviles—whether for domestic work, as sporting partners or for sex—disgusted him. It was slavery and that ran against the grain in a way he hadn't felt before blacking out on the Erasmus. Dr Muller's red-light device seemed to have disrupted his neural implant and whatever nanites the Citizenship Pill had introduced years before that. He'd lived part of his life before the United States had become the American Union. Memories of life before he took, what he'd later find out was the Citizenship Pill, seemed clearer now. Like a fog had been lifted and he could see clearly the time sequence that had led to the taking of that innocuous little white capsule.

Southern Mexico, 2073. A land of warlords and scared, disheveled masses. Wolves and sheep. Hunters and hunted. Four years since the last pretense of government power had left the tropical state of Chiapas, bordering Guatemala. It would be the last full year of the United States. The Insurgency there was well underway. Emergency Laws had been enacted by the White-controlled legislature. Detention without trial, law enforcement and military immune to prosecution, trial of detainees by military tribunal. All explained, justified by a strictly-controlled media. Rae was busy busting his ass as a US Army Ranger, tours ever longer and more frequent, leave curtailed ever since his redeployment to Chiapas after fighting insurgents back home. During a lull in fighting, his squad had been summoned to the medical tent. They were told it was part of a new enhancement program. A nanite-based treatment to help improve cognitive function. Nameless at the time. A *trial*, they were told. They'd be first, the lucky the few, then the many, later to be rolled out to civilians. The Citizenship Pill. That was it, the origin, the dividing line between his old life and what had led to now. On the same tour, the powerful enemy mortar shell had knock over the vehicle Rae had been travelling in, along a jungle trail. He was out for hours and woke up in the field hospital before being medevacked to Chicago and Cora—his then-fiancée. By 2075, the Citizenship Pill had become mandatory for Citizens of the American Union. His neural implant had come the following year—part of the Biological Upgrade Program. Not compulsory, but without it, few Citizens could compete in their profession. Soldiering was what he did. He needed the mindchip.

Dr Muller's intervention had messed with it, maybe depriving him of his career, his purpose. Yet it seemed to have reactivated a moral compass he'd kept locked in a dark, unfrequented corner of his mind. His

sense of agency felt stronger too, like he was no longer being carried along in a torrent of unexplained impulses. A little voice in his head pined for the way he'd felt before Erasmus though. There was no getting away from it. Before he felt fine, now he felt like shit. No longer was he serenely calm, dispassionately logical in the face of the strife he'd inflicted. His head throbbed. He felt sick. Before Erasmus, any anxiety or shame or remorse was short-lived. Such thoughts could be corralled, controlled, put aside. Now those demons were eating him alive.

Ahh, please... just stop! Why won't they go away?

Part of him worried that Warwick or the general or someone in Intel would know. But part of him didn't care. Fixing his neural implant was the quickest way to make it stop. He craved it.

Like an addict getting his fix.

If they knew he was untethered from his mindchip, could they tell? He wanted to decide for himself—not have them do it for him.

"Are you ok, son?" said General Hood, concern thinly veiling suspicion.

Rae stood straight, cleared his throat.

"Sir, yessir!" he called, a little too loudly.

"Right... good. Now then, the ASTRA AI's been offloaded," said the general. "Initial analysis shows it's in good shape."

Rae nodded, forcing a smile.

General Hood continued, "I can't share too much, but let's just say ASTRA is of *strategic* importance, Captain."

The general chuckled. Getting ASTRA had clearly pleased him.

"It's really gonna turn the tide against the Screamers. Everything we've been doing—locking down the borders, walling off the internet, guarding against foreign propaganda, taking out Screamers and researching a cure for the alien parasite—all this ain't just for us, Captain. No, we do it for our people, for our kids *and*... and this is our way: we do it for all humankind, even our enemies... the Alliance, the Russians, the damned *Chinese*."

"Words we can all stand behind," said Major Warwick sycophantically, looking at Rae to follow.

Ass-kissing bastard, thought Rae.

"Yessir, it's an excellent win," he said, obligingly.

"And tonight, President White will be addressing our great Union."

Rae nodded, forcing himself to play along, ever the obedient soldier.

The general continued. "He will announce that our researchers have developed a cure for the alien parasite. I've seen it with my own eyes—cures Screamers, reverting them back to human beings. A full recovery is the usual prognosis."

"That is *excellent* news, sir," said Warwick.

Rae wondered if he'd need the cure. There was a strong chance he'd been exposed to the alien parasite on the Erasmus.

He knew better than to ask details about the cure.

President White will likely spin a story about how he'll bestow the cure as a generous humanitarian gesture, thought Rae.

Then he censured himself for the disloyal thoughts that had inexplicably formed.

Hail President White! he chanted in his mind.

“Permission to ask a question, sir,” said Rae.

“Go ahead,” said the general.

“Sir, may I ask *why* the ASTRA AI is strategically important?”

“You can *ask* Captain but I’m afraid it’s classified, so I can’t tell. All I can say is that it’s unmatched and extremely valuable to our cause. If it comes to it, ASTRA could win us the next war.”

“Sir, another query if you don’t mind...”

Major Warwick, exhaled, eyeing his superior apologetically. General Hood checked his watch, eyebrows raised.

Warwick said, “The general’s a busy man, Cap—”.

The diminutive general interrupted.

“It’s ok—I like our soldiers *thinking*. Go ahead, son.”

“Thank you, sir. The Alliance just lost their primary space asset—is there any sign of blowback?”

“Alliance thinks it’s an inside man—one of the crew on a murder-suicide rampage.”

General Hood got up from leaning on the desk, came over, and patted Rae on the shoulder.

“Don’t you worry about that. No evidence and *completely* deniable. You did a great job.”

The general turned to leave. “Thank you for your service, gentlemen.”

Rae and Major Warwick got to their feet, at attention. The android-like aide followed her master to the door. General Hood reached the door and suddenly about-turned, his face pensive.

“Oh, one other thing, Captain.”

“Sir?”

“Medical tells me you need to visit the hospital, get your mind enhancement fixed.”

Rae fought hard not to react. It was being taken out of his hands. He felt numb, out-of-body, Hood’s voice distant.

If the mindchip’s shaping reality, then I’ll become a puppet. But I want this pain to stop...

Rae said nothing.

“Captain... answer the general,” said Warwick impatiently.

“Yessir, I’ll attend the hospital, sir.”

“See to it you do, Captain. Freedom Through Struggle. That is all,” said General Hood, exiting the room with his Servile, who closed the door after them.

“Freedom Through Struggle!” bellowed Rae and Warwick in unison.

“You heard the general,” said Warwick. “Get yourself to the hospital as soon as you return to SC Chicago. Check your email. The appointment will be sent through. Go home and get some rest.”

Sanctuary City Chicago, to use its full title. His hometown. Wife, no kids—not yet, not until the Reproduction Agency allowed it. Central apartment. High-end, great location. The hospital was a short walk away. A place he needed to avoid until he could work out a plan. Again, he thought of Cora. What if they were *both* compromised? Could he free her too? Free to do what? Feel like shit? Lose the cognitive abilities the mindchip brought? The appointment to fix his neural implant would be mandatory. They’d come looking if he didn’t show. Then what? Escape to the Badlands and live like an Illegal? Destitute, hunted...

He needed time to think. But thinking was his whole problem.

“It’s surgery, sir. So... do you mind if I take a few days R&R first?”

If his CO said *no*, he’d need to accept it. And Rae had no doubt in his mind they’d monitor him and make sure he *did* go straight to hospital. Was the Sanctuary City a gilded cage, a cleverly woven illusion?

“Two days R&R granted,” Warwick said, flatly. “You look like you need it.”

Rae smiled.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Be sure to get some rest with that lovely wife of yours.”

He winked, licked his lips. Warwick’s salacious grin made him sick.

Misogynistic, disrespectful bastard.

He couldn’t recall being repelled by Warwick—or for that matter General Hood—before he’d left for space. It only came as further evidence how warped his mind was. He wondered about every other Citizen. Obviously Serviles were heavily controlled.

Might as well be androids, the way they’re treated, he thought, again surprising himself at his internal protest.

It explained the lack of AI androids in America as were common in other advanced countries. He’d seen them at work while undercover in Japan and Europe. Strangely, the question had never occurred to him before.

How high does it go? he wondered. Hood? The president himself? If that’s the case, who’s controlling him?

Too many questions, not enough time. He hoped it was all a bad dream, that he was still asleep on the Erasmus or that Dr Muller’s device had tricked his mind, turned him against the country he loved. The alternative was terrifying. Bleak. *Totalitarian*. Before it was just a word. Now it took on a horrifying new meaning.

Do not be misled by what you see around you, or be influenced by what you see. You live in a world which is a playground of illusion, full of false paths, false values and false ideals. But you are not part of that world.

Sai Baba

Halfway through the 1,600 km, thirty-minute flight from Joint Base McKinnon to the Central Chicago air terminal, Rae peered down at the near total darkness below. Five years after the last Citizen resided in the Military Operations Zone, Mother Nature had gone some way to reclaiming it. Juvenile forests grew where once there had been farmland, weeds carpeted broken city streets, feral animals had multiplied. Millions of feral humans tried to survive. Buildings in thousands of abandoned towns and cities were decaying fast. Others had been bombed to smithereens by the military. Electricity was scarce. Lighting brought risks. As Rae knew well—unidentified lights, fire or smoke only attracted military strikes or bandit attacks. Since the Mexico Border Zone had been beefed up, the huge flood of humanity from the south had been stemmed. But that still left countless millions of people the government designated Illegals in AU territory. Hunting them was a huge military-industrial project.

A massacre under the guise of security, lamented Rae, once again surprising himself at his concern.

He looked around the darkened military charter cabin. Only four of the twenty-four seats held passengers—all of them uniformed men, all fast asleep. Given it was just after midnight, that didn't surprise him. The large display window beside him curved with the fuselage of the plane. Most aircraft had no real windows any more—far cheaper and more reliable to use display surfaces instead. Outside on the horizon, in front of the stubby delta-wing, he could see the lights of Kansas City—the only Sanctuary City en route. The minutes passed, and the glowing dome of light from the distant city rapidly formed into shapes of skyscrapers and roads and sprawl, some kilometers to the east. He traced the expansive Sanctuary City territory, following the floodlit perimeter with its fences, trenches, twelve-meter-high wall, and sensors. He spotted the faint lights of Army patrol drones on both land and in the air, hovering outside the perimeter.

Rae knew the Defense-in-Depth strategy well having spent six months as a grunt in the early stages of Chicago's perimeter build. The strict shoot-to-kill order had been in force since 2077 when the human rights of Illegals had been rescinded. He pursed his lips, head shaking, *feeling* the injustice of it. Before the Erasmus, he knew he would've been devoid of such thoughts. It wasn't like the old days, when it was still the US Army. After all, that was the organization he'd joined while still at college. In those days, rules of engagement were nothing like now. Shooting unarmed civilians because they were in the wrong place was something neither he nor his fellow soldiers would have accepted. Now it was routine.

A nagging doubt still clung on despite his rationalizing. Surely, part of him would have resisted if the mindchip was a technological master taking its orders from some command hierarchy. Was he a threat to state security, compromised by the enemy's devious manipulation? Perhaps Dr Muller's red-light device uploaded some instructions to work on their behalf? His head felt dizzy trying to process the evidence, the possibilities. He yawned and rubbed his eyes, aware that tiredness only worsened paranoia. His instinct told him Dr Muller had freed him from an insidious Trojan Horse—the mindchip. Knowing how the mind worked, it could've planted thoughts in his subconscious only to surface in his conscious mind as though he'd formed them himself. If that was true, then he would've had no idea they weren't his own thoughts.

The illusion of free will. Insidious, effective.

Five minutes passed. The jet had gone subsonic, dropping altitude as Chicago's own perimeter came into view up ahead. The competent, congenial male voice of the flight computer spoke over the engine hum.

“Gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking. We are now making our descent into Sanctuary City Chicago's Central Air Terminal. Please ensure your seatbelt is fastened and any loose objects are stowed. The estimated time of landing is 0035 hours. The weather in Chicago is clear with a temperature of five degrees Celsius. Thank you for flying with Advanced Air Charters.”

That the computer knew all the passengers on board were male wasn't lost on him. Neither was the fact that it referred to itself as the *pilot*. There hadn't been pilots on commercial flights for decades, but the thought still made passengers feel better.

Minutes later, the jet's twin engines swiveled progressively until they'd slowed it to a gentle forward hover, descending the remaining few hundred meters towards the expansive concrete pad. The platform of reinforced foam-concrete sat suspended quarter of a kilometer high atop four identical tower blocks. The Chicago Central Air Terminal: all the speed of supersonic air travel with a convenient downtown location. Dozens of vertical take-off and landing planes sat below. Diagonal skyways connected them to the tarmac, disappearing below into the terminal building. Another tube joined the belly of the fuselage, this one for baggage transfer. Rae watched the departure zone: a mid-size passenger jet with its wing and tail lights flashing, engines pointed in the downwards take-off position. The skyway tube retracted into the tarmac, leaving the jet to levitate, then slip forwards and upwards, gathering speed as it departed. Rae's plane landed gently, the fake pilot saying his farewells as Rae took the escalator down the skyway into the cavernous, bright-white terminal hall. Even at this time of night, the place was alive with passengers. The *Arrivals* board read *New York JFK, Washington DC, Houston, Seattle, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Boston*. Each of them one of the dozen Sanctuary Cities. No international flights here—they only went through Seattle and New York via heavily secured areas. As well as hard-to-get visas, all foreign passengers were fitted with ankle bracelets. Or *Security Tags* as the government called them.

No wonder we don't see many foreigners.

He thought back to the time before the Citizenship Pill and the Renaissance. Before President White. In those days, the only hermetically sealed states were pariahs, like North Korea.

Is that what we've become? A rogue state? An outcast?

Before the Erasmus mission, this was yet another thing he'd thought of as normal and hadn't even questioned.

Flights had long-since ceased from the lost cities of Miami and Memphis, New Orleans and Nashville, Austin and Albuquerque and almost everywhere else that had once been the United States. Then there was El Paso-Juarez—since the Badlands were created, one city, and all of it south of the border. It was de facto, but not officially, Mexican territory. From dozens of operations in Central America, he wondered why they still bothered with nation names down there. State control had all-but collapsed. Same for parts of South America too. These were heinous hellholes where merciless armed groups led by psychopaths ruled through terror.

Rae walked towards the exit under the yellow sign reading, *Exit & Connections* and underneath that, *Air Drones, Rapid Transit, Taxis*.

He stopped at the baggage return area, immediately in front of the exit, going straight to the steel locker with the green light, which had started blinking once the facial recognition had tagged him. The small display bore his name. The latch clicked open. He opened the locker and retrieved his backpack.

With trepidation, he walked towards the sliding exit doors. Cora would no doubt be there, in the eager crowd awaiting friends and relatives. He'd only been away for ten days but felt like a different man. He suspected the mindchip used augmented reality—was it a shroud of deceit furthering the aims of the Regime? Warwick and Hood had looked the same as he remembered, but would Cora? Cora was a remarkably beautiful woman. Maybe too beautiful to be real.

Tall, olive-skinned and elegant, Cora La Roche, his thirty-one-year-old wife, turned heads wherever she went. Some of it was recognition—particularly among women in the strata who could afford her brand's wares. The rest was down to her striking looks and the stylish, colorful clothing she wore. She'd founded the *Cora* luxury fashion brand eleven years earlier, while still at design school. Rae knew how hard she worked despite being well-off enough not to need to. The success itself was down to Cora and her business acumen, her talent as a designer and her earlier innovations born of a desire for more ethical clothing manufacturing. By the mid-2060s, most mass-produced clothing had come from Africa. Cheap labor toiled sixteen-hour days in huge, closed compounds, an intravenous cocktail of drugs keeping them fed and awake until they dropped dead in their twenties or thirties. In the late 2060s, as an undergrad, Cora had led the successful campaign to turn the US public against this slavery and the environmental devastation the cotton plantations brought. Her late father had been influential in politics—a Representative for three decades—formerly a Republican. He'd helped Cora's ethical campaign no doubt, but it was Cora's passion and drive that had been instrumental. Clothing manufacture had been forced back to the US where economic logic drove it towards 3D printing and tax incentives drove it to use recycled materials. The last years of the United States, when representative democracy still had the capacity to do some good. He thought back to how the rise of White had changed politics forever. After the Renaissance—when the old duopoly was quashed in favor of the one-party state—there were two choices: join President White's Nation First Party or suffer the consequences. The ethical campaign Cora had led in an earlier phase of her life would be unthinkable now.

A deal with the Devil. Once upon a time her father had been a principled man, afterwards either a puppet of President White or a puppet master of the masses, maybe both.

Cora's mother—also deceased—had been heir to a large real estate portfolio spanning several Southern cities. Thankfully—for her—she'd managed to sell up, forewarned of the seismic shifts in politics and society. Forewarned by her politician husband, they snapped up prime real estate in what would become Sanctuary Cities, magnifying their wealth. The only secure city real estate in the entire country now sat in the twelve cities. Almost everywhere else was worthless. Now Cora owned half her parents' wealth, the rest inherited by her brother. Rae wondered how meaningful ownership really was in the country that now felt alien to him, like his moral compass had been transported in time from nine years ago, since the Citizenship Pills nanites had entered his body.

And what did it do to me, exactly? Change me, yes. Made me stop questioning...

The exit doors slid open. He spotted her immediately amongst the two-dozen or so congregated around the exclusion rail. Maybe it was his honed sense of recognition, or maybe the way she stood out from a crowd. He breathed a sigh of relief, his fears about her evaporating. An uncontained smile grew on his face. That really

was the face of the person he'd met all those years ago. No augmented reality could recreate that. Her figure-hugging red dress probably cost half a soldier's annual wages, her matching leather handbag not much less. A single word was engraved on the shiny metal tag. Recognized nationally—and trade sanctions notwithstanding, globally—as a designer brand. *Cora*. Her eyes connected with his and her face lit up instantly, a radiant welcome-home smile, familiar, unfakeable. He counted himself a lucky man. Not just because of their mutual physical attraction but of the love that had grown. Whatever had changed since Erasmus, his feelings for Cora hadn't. He broke into a jog and wrapped his muscular arms around her slender waist, kissing her passionately, forgetting where they were. For the first time since he'd blacked out, he felt a degree of comfort, living in the moment, not in regret of the past or anxiety about the future.

"Cal, I missed you!" she whispered excitedly in his ear, bystanders registering him, the homecoming soldier, and his elegant wife.

"I missed you too," he said, meaning it, but releasing a long sigh nevertheless.

They held each other close, his head above and beside hers. He let his shaven cheek run over the silken mane of her dark hair as he breathed the familiar smell of his wife as though absorbing something of her essence. She maneuvered, creating a little distance, going face-to-face. He knew she'd already picked up on the troubled countenance he was failing to hide. His eyes wandered lost in thought, emotions caught between homecoming joy and his toxifying internal dilemma. He avoided her questioning eyes, instead eyeing the wavy, strands of hair which framed her face, her delicate nose, and high cheekbones. Her dreamy, wide eyes seemed to draw in his, establishing a window to his soul.

"How *was* it? How are you, Cal? Is everything okay? You seem... *different*. Did something happen?"

He didn't want to talk here, in public. He forced a smile that would fool no one.

"Ah, you know... same old thing," he said breezily. "Helping the good guys, taking out bad guys, keeping the nation safe."

He broke off the embrace, her eyes lingering on him for a second, brow momentarily furrowed, before a tight smile replaced it. She knew too that it wasn't the time or place.

A young man approached. Small, dark-skinned, wearing a porter's uniform.

"May I help with your bag, sir?" he said, his face looking up at Rae, eager to please. He had the same detached look General Hood's aide had had.

A Servile. Poor guy.

Without much thought, Rae smiled kindly. He wondered about this man's story as a proxy for the legions of Serviles doing all the shit Citizens didn't want to.

Was he captured from the Badlands and Servile-chipped or born into it? Maybe he'd volunteered—that's what the Government said: that it's a better life than starving or doing mundane jobs without the Servile chip.

"No, thanks. I'm good."

The Servile nodded and approached an older man holding a suitcase.

Rae and Cora held hands, walking together towards the exit elevator, the crowd thinning a little now. The soft skin on her delicate hands felt luxuriant.

"So how long do I have you for this time?" she said flatly.

He looked at his wife. She moved with long, effortless strides yet looked anxious as she awaited his reply.

“Two days until—”

“That’s all?” she said, frowning.

“Two days, ‘til my appointment at Lakeshore Hospital, then—”

She stopped, her worried eyes seeking comfort, explanation.

“Why? What’s wrong?—”

He smiled reassuringly, brushed aside a stray lock of hair from her face. Keeping up appearances.

Who knows what surveillance is watching? Paranoia. Uncharacteristic.

“No, no—nothing to worry about—just some work on my mindchip, that’s all.”

He kissed her softly, then they continued walking hand-in-hand.

“Huh... Guess they’ve finally worked out you’re crazy.”

The joke fell flat. He smiled, and broke eye contact as they stepped onto the traveller towards the elevator bank.

“Anyway, should be an overnight stay and then two weeks’ leave.”

“As long as you’re ok...”

“Promise. Not a big deal.”

There was a tension now. He was hiding something, and *he* knew *she* knew. He tried to change the subject. A weighty topic too, but one they were both in on. Starting a family. Children. Something inside him yearned for children with Cora. It was something primal, powerful and recurring that he’d only ever felt with her. He took comfort that he’d felt it before the mindchip, before the Citizenship Pill. That was becoming his new test of what was real and what might be a confection. But his feelings on starting a family had changed since the Erasmus. Until he could work out what was real, how could he contemplate it? His eyes had been opened and what he’d seen he didn’t like. How could he bring a child into a world like this? A world of state-sanctioned enslavement of Serviles, of extra-judicial killing of unarmed civilians. It wasn’t his love for Cora that had faded—he loved her even more and saw how much she’d need him if this nightmare was real.

“So, did the Reproduction Agency rule... on our appeal?” he said, his words trailing off as he realized what he was saying, another red flag appearing, a warning about the type of world they were in.

Her face grew dark, slight shake of the head, then she looked away, said nothing. He felt her pain.

What right do they have...? he thought angrily.

They continued in silence for a second before she took a deep breath and turned to face him.

“Erm...” she said, blinking away the tears, composing herself. “The Reproduction Agency declined our appeal. Our next chance is in a year’s time. The government have their reasons—they know what’s best for society, Cal.”

He said nothing, sadness in his eyes.

They approached the end of the traveller and a female Servile cleaning the floor near the elevator bank, moved aside. She lowered her eyes and bowed her head as they neared. They strolled through the skywalk tunnels spanning several downtown towers high above the surface streets. The network of tubular walkways and elevators served the city center. On passing the venerable Willis Tower, Rae eyed the 750-meter-high shard-shaped *One Renaissance* through the walkway’s glass ceiling. Home to the rich and powerful. Home to Cora

and him. To the right, Lake Michigan stretched to the north and east, its darkness only broken by the lights of the perimeter, a kilometer offshore. Specks of light from security drones swarmed above it like fireflies.

“Welcome home, Cal,” Cora said on reaching the grand hotel-like lobby of *One Renaissance*.

The staff outnumbered the residents by some margin. A Servile bellhop, aging and tired-looking, offered to take his backpack.

“No, th—”

“Yes, take it,” said Cora coldly.

He reluctantly gave it to the old man. Not for the first time since his return, he noticed the disdainful way Cora and others treated Serviles. He recalled having no such distaste before the Erasmus—they were just a normal part of life. They had their place in society, Citizen had theirs. Yet now it seemed wrong. And he didn’t know his wife could act so coldly either. It felt incongruent to the person she’d been before. The person he’d met during the upheaval of the Insurgency.

By late 2072 the Insurgency was burning with an intensity no one would’ve predicted before the terror attacks that had begun earlier that year—the same year President White’s regime took the reins of power. Mass transit systems were hit first: the New York Subway, the Chicago ‘L’ then the DC Metro. Military-grade C4. Automatic weapons. A State of Emergency was called but violence begot violence. Next came other targets: government and police facilities, power stations, airports, the list went on. Well-coordinated and deadly. The attacks inflamed the toxic mix of home-grown protest and foreign involvement—much of it via the collapsed border with the collapsed Mexico. The protests—born of the Global Depression, starting in 2066—had metastasized, morphed into civil disorder, then insurrection. Protests against the grinding poverty and the corruption that had taken root, which President White vowed to stamp out. Public servants—including some in law enforcement and the military—were as disgruntled as the rest. Into the mix went thuggish Nation First Party supporters and other extremist groups stoking tensions, creating pretexts for harsher policy. Racial and political tinder was ignited all over the country. Rae thought back to that time. Swathes of cities were like warzones. The command structure of the US military was intact though, the proportion of rogue units small. But to say the military was stretched was an understatement. Conscription was still a year away. Rae and his Army Ranger unit hotshotted from city to burning city, executing surgical strikes, putting down the uprising, but never killing unarmed civilians. Strict rules of engagement in those days. Enemy combatants only—unarmed targets were arrested not shot. He prevented killing too, rescued people from horrendous fates. Rescued Cora.

Lincoln Park, Chicago, October 15, 2072. Time of extraction: 2330 hours. The once universally well-to-do neighborhood had remained a relatively safe harbor to the luckier end of society in Global Depression America. But when they came, police and private patrols failed to stop the place being overrun by the *Langostas*—a Sinaloa-based warlord’s gang—mostly ex-Mexican Special Forces and infantry. Skilled in urban warfare. No pushover. Profiting from the mayhem, they rampaged into the wealthy suburb, looting safes, taking guns, heirlooms, art and people. People for ransom, forced labor and sexual slavery. Cora got left behind at her parents’ townhouse. Her parents were out of town, but due back that evening. She wanted to surprise them but had arrived before them, so had some time to kill. So she grabbed a little downtime, a couple of hours visiting Rome in the Virtual Reality room, her devices set to *Do Not Disturb*. It had happened fast. The police evacuated the neighborhood, but they moved on when no one came to the door. In swept the *Langostas*.

Rae's Ranger unit was already on the ground engaging them two kilometers to the southeast at South Fields when the call came in. Only the third vehicle of their convoy of three lightly-armored trucks survived the roadside bomb attack. And only just. After the ensuing fire-fight, he was the sole survivor, but separated from his dead comrades and their vehicles, evading capture while working his way to the trapped civilian in the townhouse. A high-priority civilian, he'd been told—the CEO of some company he'd never heard of, the daughter of some high-up politician he had heard of but couldn't place. From the darkness of the backyard, he'd watched with nightvision, as three gun-toting gang-members infiltrated the target property. They had nightvision too but hadn't seen him concealed in the bushes. Lieutenant Rae moved, stalking his prey, entering the back door. He found one keeping watch at the base of the stairs to the second floor and fired a burst of suppressed headshots. The guy crumpled to the floor where he stood. Rae crept up the stairway, sweeping the advance, senses alert. A commotion erupted from one of the upstairs bedrooms—some scrambling, a gruff, heavily-accent shout, then shrill scream of a woman. He accelerated up the stairs two-at-a-time, stealthy and fast. Light leaked from the door to the left—the bedroom at the back of the townhouse overlooking the backyard. From there came a slap, cutting short the woman's latest scream. Rae's head emerged above the second-floor landing. The woman shrieked. He saw the bedroom door half open, the woman on the double bed with a rough, full-bearded man-beast over her, pinning her down, grasping at her jean buttons, trying to get them off. The other intruder—standing watch in the corner of the bedroom—clocked Rae on the darkened landing. Rae saw the reaction on his face, then the arm movement as the bogie tried to raise his assault rifle. Rae's gun was already straight and level and aimed. A three-round grouping peppered the bogie's forehead as the woman fought back against her now-distracted assailant. Rae shot him too, his giant body collapsing to the side of her before slumping to the bedroom floor after she shoved him off her. Rae confirmed the target's name—Cora—then apologized for the blood splatter on her face, before setting off to secure the townhouse as best he could. Small-arms fire echoed from multiple directions, near and far. They were cut off, behind enemy lines by the heavily-militarized *Langostas*. He returned to the bedroom with a wet washcloth for Cora to wipe the wannabe-rapist's blood off her face. She was shaken yet seemed more angry than beaten. Without being told, she took the dead guy's assault rifle and nightvision and they turned off the bedroom light and moved to the top floor master bedroom. They'd both seen approaching fighters outside going house-to-house, sweeping the neighborhood, the main force who'd soon enter the townhouse to find their vanguard dead. It was too dangerous to leave. Hunkering down in the walk-in wardrobe with Cora, he called it in only to find re-enforcements more than an hour away. He couldn't do everything. Not against the numbers they were facing. Cora saved his ass, killing several attackers, one of whom had crept up unnoticed by Rae as he pulled down the attic ladder. She'd turned just in time and shot past him, the round pulsing past his cheek and into the bogie. They fought off three waves of attack before help came. It ended up taking two hours, not one. During those two hours, it was them against the world.

“Hello! Earth to Cal... Are you *feeling* ok?” she chuckled nervously, staring at him as he emerged from his mind-trip.

He cleared his throat, said, “Err... yeah, I'm fine. Just tired.”

The old Servile waited, expressionless, pretending not to be there.

“Right... Serviles are here to *serve* us. That's why they're called *Serviles*. They *like* it. Remember? Anyway, this one's on his way out next week.”

“Sure.”

He needed time to forge a plan but hadn't yet figured out how much to tell Cora. She had taken the Citizenship Pill like every other Citizen. She'd opposed it for as long as she could. But by 2075, the Regime's grip on power was such that it became law. To not take it wasn't a choice at all. That would mean becoming a non-Citizen and either leaving the country forever or becoming an Illegal in the Badlands. Cora had Rae, and had her family, her friends, her business. Rae's story was different. They'd essentially tricked him into taking it in 2073 by not disclosing what it was. She'd also had neural implants herself—common, especially amongst the professional class and elite, but by no means universal. As far as he understood it, the Citizenship Pill ensured susceptibility to Regime information.

Propaganda, he corrected himself.

Mindchips, on the other hand, had a wide variety of functions. Cora's mindchip helped her retain facts, connect straight to the Net and recognize anyone, Citizen or Servile. Like the Servile in front of them.

“What do you mean, *on his way out*?”

She stopped before reaching the elevator, looked at him quizzically.

“Are you *sure* you're ok, Cal?”

She sighed, drew closer, whispering, “Passed his functional life. *On his way out*.”

He felt numb, looked over at the old guy struggling with his heavy backpack.

“Right, sorry. I'm just tired.”

She leaned over and kissed him.

“Not too tired for *me* I hope.”

“Never.”

The elevator opened straight into their luxury apartment taking up the entire one-hundred-eighty-fifth floor. At this height the obelisk-shaped *One Renaissance* narrowed to 'only' the size of half a football field. Continuous glass windows bordered each side of the high-ceilinged condo. Situated close to the lakeshore, the living room faced Lake Michigan. The moonless night gave view to billions of stars, the dusty band of the Milky Way running across the sky as the backdrop. Rae's eyes caught the brief flicker of tracer fire somewhere over the dark water, far outside the Chicago perimeter. The flash of an explosion from whatever the military had hit.

Probably some starving Illegals' fishing boat.

A faint glow replaced it.

Cora came over and pulled him close, kissing him passionately. Her full, velvety lips and sultry, inviting eyes were enough to render him defenseless.

His hands explored the contours of her body—a playground for the returning soldier. Her skin felt silky and delicate to the touch. He continued reacquainting his mind with her form—her toned midriff, slender waist and firm, curvaceous rear. He'd not been with her for just a fortnight, but she felt brand new. This novelty aroused him even more than he could remember. She reached around and unzipped her dress, the thin red cloth slipping down to her breasts, holding up momentarily on her nipples before falling to the plush carpeted floor. Now wearing only her matching red heels, desire overwhelmed them.

Steam and cascading hot water enveloped him as he watched Cora drop her bath robe to join him in the en suite's walk-in shower. It was the only place in the apartment safe from surveillance cameras, the roar of water from overhead hiding their words from the ever-alert, Ruby. That was the name of the home's AI assistant. Every home Rae had ever seen had a Ruby. It was mandatory. But a concession in the building code gave a modicum of privacy in the shower. Everyone knew she spied for the Regime as well as suggesting recipes for dinner. Nearly total surveillance was yet another thing he had simply accepted before Dr Muller had changed his view of the world. Despite feeling more connected after their love-making, a tension, a nervousness remained as his naked wife wrapped her arms around his neck and reached up to kiss him long and slow. He found it distracting but broke off the embrace. This was the moment. The moment of trust, of vulnerability, a leap of faith. Telling his wife what was going on in view of the possibility she may report him to the feared State Intelligence Agency. If he couldn't tell Cora, who could he tell?

He locked eyes with her, holding her close, then leaned down to whisper in her ear away from the shower flow.

"Cora... I have something to tell you," he said sternly.

She held him closer, giggling. He'd sometimes tease her like this. First, he'd come over all serious, pause a few seconds, then come out with some silly, trivial thing like, "You have weird toes," on account of her big toes being a lot shorter than the neighboring one. She wasn't to know this time he wasn't kidding.

When the tease didn't come, he felt her try to break the embrace, but he held onto her.

"I really do have something important to tell you," he said. "But we can't let Ruby hear. Ok?"

"Ok," she whispered, nodding slightly, her voice somewhere between concerned and intrigued.

"Something happened to me while on mission. Something that disrupted my mindchip, maybe the nanites in my system too."

"Yes, of course—you already told me that you're going to the hospital to get fixed. It didn't sound serious at the air terminal. So... what happened to you then?"

"Some sort of disruptor device fired at me by the enemy. It made me black out. When I came to, I felt different. I've felt different ever since. Some of the functionality doesn't work. Information recall. My fusion flicker rate is back to biological."

"So, go to Lakeshore Hospital in two days' time, like you said. You'll be good as new!" she said airily, trying to make light of it.

"I guess I will... I mean... They will *want* me to, yes. But I might not go."

"Why not?"

"Because of what I've seen."

"*Because of what you've seen?* Like what?" she said, now more concerned. "Please, not another head injury. Last time was *so* bad, Cal."

The time when she stuck with him after his traumatic head injury from the Baton Rouge mission in 2073. A year after they'd met. The doctors had stabilized him, sent him home to Cora. The way it had affected his behaviors wasn't pretty. Mood swings. Anger. Depression. Her thriving business needed her too. No contest. She took three months off work and hired people to fill the gap. They could have hired a nurse instead, but she

felt it her duty to be with her fiancé. He knew she'd saved him from himself. And in the process had cemented their relationship in a more permanent place, matured them past lust and infatuation and into love.

The shower was now like a steam bath. He conveyed to her the visceral feelings evoked in the pit of his stomach at what he'd seen. The extra-judicial imprisonments and killings, the enslaved Serviles, the total surveillance, total control of the media, no freedom of movement outside the cities without permission, a one-party state with President White as dictator for life. Now he could remember more clearly, the comparison to life in the United States was stark. She listened, hardly saying a word. He paused and opened his eyes, still holding her close. Her hair had long-since flattened into a silky, wavy mane streaming water down her back. The skin on her shoulders and back had flushed from the hot water. He felt nauseous as he confessed his sins. The terrible things he'd done without really knowing why. Like the American scientist in Edinburgh who he'd beaten and strangled because someone in Intel had ordered it. "Make him suffer," his handler had said. The faces haunted him. His remembering brain now recalled the atrocities he'd executed without compunction. By the time he'd finished, his hot tears were tributaries to the river of shower water flowing down the drain.

He composed himself as Cora comforted him, holding him close, whispering soothing words.

"We've got through difficult times before. I'm always here for you."

But this was a tear in the fabric of his reality. A traumatic waking from a nightmare, only to find himself in yet another nightmare.

For a while they said nothing, just let the hot water run over their entwined bodies. Then he started speaking. If he couldn't trust Cora then there was no one else left to trust. He told her everything. About the Erasmus and Dr Muller's device that had made him black out and changed his world. About the injustices and oppression and the way he now remembered how things used to be. The one-party state. Surveillance everywhere. The more he thought about it, the more he realized what a monster the country had morphed into. Cora listened intently, nodding, seemingly in accord with his impassioned whispers masked by the flow of the shower. Yet he knew there was a risk in telling her, such was the power he suspected the Regime held over Citizens' minds. But he had no choice. His time window was short. Once they fixed his mindchip at the hospital, any choice he thought he had would be gone.

Then came the words he never thought he'd say. He was strong, had his pride. He was the protector. Yet he felt more vulnerable than ever. Holding her face, he saw she'd been crying too, but there remained a caring strength in those light blue eyes.

"I'm scared," he whispered.

"I know," she said.

"I don't know what to believe. I—I don't *want* it to be true. I keep thinking, maybe this is all trickery..."

His words trailed off.

"What do you mean, Cal?"

"Maybe the Alliance have re-programmed my mind to believe what *they* want me to believe. Like... like a Manchurian Candidate or something..."

She looked at him, puzzled.

"What is that... a *Manchurian Candidate*?"

"It's someone being used as a puppet by an enemy. Like the Alliance."

She nodded, gave a tight smile.

“Yes,” she said approvingly. “The Alliance is our enemy.”

She pulled him close once more and rubbed his back.

“I have faith in you, Cal, but you need to get to the hospital and get some help.”

He said nothing.

“We’ll get through this, Cal. I’m here for you.”

The secret of freedom lies in educating people, whereas the secret of tyranny is in keeping them ignorant.

Maximilien Robespierre

He woke up alone in the darkness, head in his hands, panting, covered in sweat, his heart thumping. Images lingered from his nightmare. He pressed his fingers tight into his ears in a vain attempt to shut out the scream that had shocked him awake. The dissident ambassador lady he'd kidnapped from her own home in Rome before smuggling her back to New York and handing her over to the State Intelligence Agency. Realizing now where he was, he sat up in bed, wiping his wet brow on his cotton tee-shirt, regaining his breath. His eyes adjusted to half-light. Only the dim nightstand lamp fought the darkness of the blackout glass running along two sides of the corner bedroom. He sat back, releasing the tension in his body and recalled his nightmares. The faces of those he'd kidnapped and killed had plagued his sleep—people that his chipped mind had long-since forgotten had come flooding back. It felt real, reliving the brutality he'd wrought, wanting to stop himself but being unable to. He rubbed his eyes as his heartbeat calmed. Despite the full night's sleep, he felt exhausted, as though his mind hadn't rested at all. But now he was awake and didn't want to return to the horrors his sleeping mind had relived. No sound came but for the gentle flow of air through the ducted heating vents in the master bedroom's ceiling and some indiscernible noises transmitted through the building's structure and of the faintest sounds of the city far below.

"Cora!" he called, thinking maybe she was in the ensuite.

No reply. It was a Monday. She'd have gone to work early. He checked the time. 0915.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Again, came the terrified face of Ambassador Lowell—the lady he'd dragged out of her residence in the dead of night in Rome.

Probably dead or Servile by now, he thought, wincing, his head shaking in self-disgust.

He tried to rationalize that it had been involuntary, that it must've been the mindchip's doing. Otherwise, why would he feel such disgust now? Being a Manchurian Candidate was the only alternative to this theory. That would be so much easier. Just go back to how it was before Dr Muller released his demons. He would just need to attend the hospital tomorrow and let them do the rest. But that was a one-way street, a ratchet. A chance encounter like on the Erasmus would probably never happen again. He'd joined the US Army to find his purpose, to get trained up and be great, to serve a cause he'd seen as righteous. He hadn't joined to kill innocent people and serve a regime whose character was becoming disturbingly clear to him only now.

He arose and went to the open-plan kitchen-lounge to get coffee, fully aware he was inside the surveillance bubble. He knew he had to be careful. Part of him was already questioning the way he'd told Cora everything last night. But his emotions had overtaken him. He had to tell someone. Who else could he confide in? His buddies in SC Chicago, mostly military guys? The handful of friends he still knew from college? His and Cora's friends from the tennis club? Definitely not. Cora was the only one he could trust. Whatever path he followed now, he needed her. None of that changed the fact that she may betray him against her will though. Had he been stupid? Time would tell. Of one thing he was totally sure: that the AI assistant, Ruby, would relay everything to the State Intelligence Agency. Ruby was listening. Ruby was watching. Always vigilant.

"Good morning, Ruby," he said as cheerily as he could.

"Good morning, Cal," said the home's virtual assistant. "Would you like a coffee? Black, no sugar?"

“Yes please, Ruby.”

He wondered what she was feeding back to her masters.

“My pleasure, Cal.”

He retrieved the steaming mug from the counter-top machine and sat down on the couch. Out the window to his right, the brilliant blue sky had transformed the lake and its frame of autumn land beyond the walled city. The reds, yellows and golden browns of fall. The newly ascendant forest covered everything that wasn't city or lake.

Reverting to wilderness. Maybe nature deserves it more than we do.

“Ruby, put on the TV news, please.”

The large internal wall transformed from what looked like textured, designer wallpaper, complete with unframed modern art canvases, to a four-meter-wide TV display. The strangely ageless news anchor of the country's only news channel—National News Network, 3N—sat next to his younger female presenter. His plastic perma-smile stretched into a grin, even when talking. Rae found it odd how David Lincoln never aged. He was one of just four middle-aged male anchors, that had been a constant since the Renaissance, eight years prior. By contrast, the cast of much younger female hosts and reporters was like a revolving door. He didn't know much about news broadcasting, but if experience and continuity was important to the male presenters, why not the females? And why were all the reporters women? It seemed strange, illogical. Prejudiced. The more he thought about this society, the more he didn't like.

“And now today's headlines,” said Lincoln. “Security Secretary, Oliver Young, announces that people infected with the alien parasite have been discovered in large numbers at locations near the Southern Border Zone. Secretary Young informs that this worrying development is a deliberate act of terror orchestrated by Democratic Alliance Special Forces and terrorists in the Military Operations Zone.”

A video clip played of the ruddy-faced, rotund Secretary Young in the White House cabinet room.

“President White will be unequivocal when he meets Alliance representatives later today. They need to convince us that they have the parasite under control, and they have nothing to do with the outbreak in the MOZ. Frankly, I'm *not* convinced. We're working on eradicating it in our territory. The Alliance needs to do the same,” he concluded, thumping the table.

The news show returned to the studio—this time an artificially-perfect-looking young woman with a pink-highlighted, bleached blonde coif. Rae didn't recognize her.

“A true patriot, David,” she said deferentially, turning to her colleague.

“He sure is, Petra.”

“*Staying* with problems caused by the DA,” she said, “President White has renewed calls for the Alliance to rescind its security guarantee of El Paso-Juarez. He told a press conference last night that ever since the city unified and had to remain south of the border zone it had been a nest of vipers harboring terrorists and enemy agents.”

Another clip—this time of President White in the Rose Garden. Rae regarded the strangely ageless dictator's air of respectability. His all-white *Renaissance-style* suit with red collarless grandfather-style shirt beneath was standard presidential dress. The neatly trimmed white beard, bald head and round wire-rim glasses gave an air of respectability. The lapel badge carried the flag of the American Union: twelve red and white stripes representing the Sanctuary Cities, a quadrant of dark blue with a single white star. It used to arouse

patriotic feelings in Rae, now it just reminded him of the Stars and Stripes they'd lost. When he was young, he—like most other people—thought revolution was something that only happened in backward hellholes.

How wrong we were.

“Loyal Citizens, let me convey the message I am making clear to the irresponsible politicians of the Alliance.” Pause for effect, looks directly into the camera. “Time is running short. *My patience* is running short. The Russians and Chinese feel the same. You either need to quell the alien parasite forthwith or accept the consequences. This scourge is a threat to all humanity. Deal with it or *we will!*”

Back to synthetically-beautiful Petra in the studio.

“Strong words from a strong leader,” she said admiringly.

Rae exhaled, shook his head. None of it rang true anymore.

“And now for some *good* news,” she said. “We reported yesterday on the introduction of much-improved neural chip, code-named *Florida*. Well now more good news. The Manpower Agency is forecasting *falling prices.*”

“That’s *right,*” said David Lincoln. “The average unit price is set to fall below ten thousand dollars for the first time in our history, making labor more affordable than ever for Citizens and businesses alike. Jeremiah Hunt, the Manpower Secretary reported the good news today when he unveiled his agency’s quarterly price forecast.”

Petra continued. “But he *did* warn that some categories may actually *rise*. High-end female Serviles below twenty-five and high-end males below thirty-five were among the categories bucking the trend.”

The anchorman took on a look of mock disappointment. Petra giggled obligingly, before the segment ended with Lincoln guffawing at his own attempt at humor.

“What the hell is wrong with... Feel like I need a damn shower,” Rae muttered, forgetting home-spy Ruby for a moment.

He watched in disbelief as the news turned into an infomercial extoling the virtues of owning a domestic Servile—a slave in all but name. It wasn’t lost on him that the majority—though not all—of the worker Serviles he’d noticed since Erasmus had been people of color. His stomach lurched, feelings of shame at having worked for this system. The more he saw, the more the Manchurian Candidate theory felt academic. Maybe it was possible the Alliance had developed that red-light device to turn him against his own side, but the weight of evidence said otherwise. The weight of evidence told him the American Union was rotten to the core. His brief window on this vile society frightened him. The facts would guide him. The fact they’d all been made to take a Citizenship Pill full of nanites that did who knows what to the brain. He realized that ever since shortly after taking it, he no longer questioned Regime propaganda. It had had a strange hold over him—even things he’d normally find boring like government restructuring and which gray-haired politician was taking over which role.

And how, exactly, does the Citizenship Pill predispose us to Regime messaging? How does it know which messages are important and which aren’t? Maybe a subliminal signal in displays or sounds?

Another fact: that to compete in any professional job, you needed a mindchip supplied by the same state that ran total surveillance. He was pretty sure that only those who’d been softened up by the Citizenship Pill would contemplate having a mindchip. He had. And he’d done it willingly, unlike the Citizenship Pill which had been undisclosed by the military. His jaw clenched as anger grew at the thought of what they’d done. He’d

served as a deadly puppet, hypnotized by a technological Trojan Horse. He swigged the last of his coffee and slammed down the mug. He couldn't go back. Sometime tomorrow they'd restore his mindchip. Once again, he would under its spell, a slave to the Regime. He couldn't let that happen.

His thoughts turned to Cora. She'd also gone to Lakeshore Hospital voluntarily like he had, and came out with the tell-tale scar hidden beneath her hair on the top of her scalp.

Not voluntary with the Citizenship Pill's nanites already in our bodies, he corrected himself.

Whatever. The simple truth was that she was victim, not perpetrator, and he needed her to gain freedom alongside him. He could hardly imagine a life without her.

He refilled his coffee on the way to the desk in the study. He needed to check the exact time of the hospital appointment tomorrow, see how long he had left. The display in the study detected his presence and glowed to life.

"Would you like to check your messages?" Ruby asked.

It was creepy how she could predict behavior.

Always watching.

"Yes please, Ruby."

A page of mostly unread messages appeared, all dated in the last two weeks. Mostly low-level military and promotional crap from companies. He found the appointment for tomorrow afternoon at Lakeshore Hospital at the bottom of his inbox. He noted the hospital appointment. 3pm check-in.

Less than thirty hours to escape with Cora or stay in the system forever. Escape and go where, exactly? The Badlands first, of course—there was little else outside the perimeter. Then to Canada maybe, a member of the Democratic Alliance. Apply for asylum along with Cora. Build a new life and leave this fucked up place behind. Or would the Alliance try me as a spy or as a war criminal or flat-out refuse entry? And getting there with Cora won't be easy...

He was a trained operative. Cora was an urban civilian, albeit a fit, smart and resourceful one. Maybe without his implant, battlesuit and weapons, and with half the military hunting him, he'd struggle to do it *solo*. Pre-occupied, he scanned down the list of messages again. The subject title of a message from *Wiki Digest* dated November 9, caught his eye: *On This Day in History: Kristallnacht 1938*. He couldn't remember subscribing to the online encyclopedia. But then again, there was a whole lot he couldn't recall, and he *was* interested in history. He checked his watch. Curiosity made him open the *Wiki Digest* message. It contained a list of subjects linking to their *Wiki* page. Some were blurred out, the overlying text stating: 'Inappropriate Content'.

Censorship, in other words.

The short summary on *Kristallnacht 1938* wasn't censored.

150 years ago—too far back in history to bother the Regime.

He gestured with his finger to open the link, the computer tracking his eyes and hand movements. Up popped the *Wiki* page. He skim-read the article about how the Nazi pogrom against Jews 9-10 November 1938 had caused nearly a hundred deaths, terrorized the Jewish populace and resulted in the smashing of windows of Jewish-owned buildings across Germany. Hence the name *Kristallnacht* or 'Crystal Night' in English. Orchestrated by the thuggish SA with wide civilian participation, the Nazi authorities did not intervene. Scanning down further a name caught his eye. A link to an S. Muller, President of Johns Hopkins University from 1972 to 1990 whose Jewish father was arrested by the Nazis on *Kristallnacht* when Muller was ten. They

escaped Germany just before the war began. Rae eyed the name *Muller*. Was it coincidence that this article contained the same surname—albeit a common one—as his old college professor, *Stephanie Muller*? The computer interpreted his remained focus on the name like a mouseover, prompting a tooltip dialog to appear.

‘Water the plants, S. Muller,’ read the tooltip.

He stared, wide-eyed, reading and re-reading, worrying the State Intelligence Agency would ping him. He memorized the message and looked away. He frowned, exhaling deeply, before looking at the name ‘S. Muller’ on the *Wiki* page again. This time nothing. No tooltip dialog, just plain text. He closed the page and noticed the message had gone from his inbox.

What the hell...?

It could only mean one thing—Dr Muller was trying to make contact. And from the way the message had bypassed the State Intelligence Agency, found him then vanished, either she or someone else had some hardcore computer skills.

Water the plants. Must be a signal.

He guessed by one of the windows. Easier to spot from outside. Assuming whoever it was didn’t somehow have an inside view.

He walked calmly to the kitchen, placed his half-drunk coffee in the sink and took a glass, filling it with water before having a gulp. He looked over to one of the potted houseplants across the island in the living area.

“Looks like the plants are as thirsty as I am, Ruby.”

“Yes, Cal,” replied the ever-ready computer. “The last time a Servile watered them was three days ago. Shall I recommend to Cora that she replaces one or more of your Serviles? I can recommend which ones if required.”

“No, it’s ok, I’ll water them.”

He found a small plastic jug and filled it with water. He wondered if Ruby had already reported in to State Intel. Rae knew there was no way to switch off the home’s computer without it raising a flag.

The spy in our midst.

No choice. It was a risk he’d have to take. He’d go ahead and water them all. He watered the plants in the lounge and connecting corridor, continuing into the bedrooms, bathrooms, study, media room and gym. He felt Ruby watching, tracking his movements with her sensors.

He finished up, placing the jug in the sink and returning to the master bedroom’s ensuite to take a shower. He ran the water, undressed and got in the large, walk-in shower, water streaming over his closed eyes like warm rain from above. He heard a gentle hum, faint behind the rush of water enveloping his sense. Eyes open, he saw it. A wasp hovering just beyond the shower stream. He watched it land on the wall, its tiny compound eyes staring back at him. It amazed him how an insect a millionth the mass of a large man like him could evoke irrational fears. He drew closer, stepping out of the shower’s flow. Peering closer, he saw that this was no ordinary wasp. Its wings were too regular, lacking the complexity of nature. The vectorized curves of its abdomen seemed slightly peculiar too. Now within half a meter, the wasp still hadn’t moved. Without warning its head glowed red, like a tiny, faint LED. After a few seconds it went out. Then a pattern of blinking laser light directed straight at his eyes. Reflexively he looked away, closed his eyes, wary of laser damage. Lids shut, he thought it through. It wasn’t logical that they’d go to all this trouble just to cause him some eye damage. He

looked again. The wasp seemed to track his eye position and the blinking red light recommenced. Rae immediately recognized it as Morse code.

Greetings from Dr Muller. You recognized me on Erasmus, so the prototype device worked. You are no longer blinded from the truth. You are no longer a prisoner of your mind. We hope the reality you see convinces you to take up our offer. Find your way to the Governor in El Paso-Juarez. Come alone. Our offer will remain open for as long as possible. But time is running out now AU has ASTRA. End of message.

The red light went out and the wasp-drone flew away, disappearing into the extractor duct on the ceiling.

He recalled the message, shocked, impressed, confused. Shocked that Dr Muller knew it was him on the Erasmus. The only explanation was that the Alliance had an asset feeding them mission details. Or could their mindchip neutralizer read it as well as switch it off? He didn't know the answer, but that they'd pinged him and sent the message, impressed him. The Regime had locked down the Sanctuary Cities tight. Nothing went in or out without Intel knowing. *Almost* nothing. A lot confused him. What was their offer exactly? For all he knew it could be a trap. Or a test by the State Intelligence Agency. And what the hell did they mean by time is running out now the Regime has the ASTRA AI he'd taken? And why El Paso-Juarez and not Canada? That's Alliance territory too. So few words, so many questions. One thing he *did* know for sure: he couldn't stay. And if he had to go, Cora had to come with him. He *couldn't* go alone as the message had instructed. Even though she was chipped and still blind to reality, he loved her. He couldn't just leave her. If Dr Muller's device had set him free, then it could free Cora too. Reason enough for them *both* to get to El Paso-Juarez.

There is no crueller tyranny than that which is perpetuated under the shield of law and in the name of justice.

Montesquieu

Rae dried off after his shower and changed into his old combat pants, dark tee and black jogging top with a small Army logo on the front. He checked his watch: nearly 10am.

“Hey, Ruby!”

“Yes, Cal?”

“Call Cora, please”

“My pleasure...”

He wandered back to the living area. Ring tones sounded through the integrated speakers.

“Morning sleepy head,” said Cora, the image of her in her office appearing on the videowall. “How are you feeling?”

He could tell she was forcing her smile, but her voice was laced with real concern. There was no way they could discuss his near-breakdown and tell-all in the shower from last night on a videocall. The fake veneer on their behavior would need to remain until he got her in a safe place to talk.

“Good morning beautiful,” he said, smiling involuntarily. “What time d’you plan on getting home tonight?”

“Why?” she said, mischief in her tone. “You want more of what we did last night? I can come home a little early. Let me check my calendar... Sure, I’ll get back mid-afternoon sometime. If something comes up—”

“If something comes up, you’ll leave it to your very capable managers,” he said.

“Yes, my lord. Your wish is my command!”

They said their goodbyes and clicked off. No mention of what must have been a disturbed night’s sleep for Cora, what with him tossing and turning. No mention of anything substantial. Ruby was listening and all calls were monitored by the State Intelligence Agency.

He grabbed some food and checked the storage closet in the study. He found his Go-Pack on the bottom shelf next to the gun locker. All military personnel had Go-Packs issued to them for times of national emergency. All off-duty military had to be ready to act. He checked its contents: ten days of compact MRIs, water-purifying bottle, med-kit, two-way radio, solar charger, compact sleeping bag and a vicious-looking survival knife. Mostly low-tech, all about self-sufficiency, in case the Net and electrical power went offline. He used the combination dial and opened the gun locker. Sitting upright in its rack was the fully mechanical assault rifle. The M4A1 carbine looked like last century’s technology. He knew it *was* last century’s tech, but reliable. It came with a thirty 5.56mm round magazine, telescoping stock, tactical light and scope. A spare clip and boxes of ammo sat on the shelf below. On the other shelf was the 9mm handgun with two boxes of ammunition. He removed the weapons and took his time stripping them down, checking them over and re-assembling them. On replacing the guns, he purposely forgot to lock the locker.

He closed the locker door, then the closet and sat behind the desk weighing how he could download some detailed maps without raising a flag, when Ruby said, “Excuse me Cal, but you have forgotten to lock the gun locker.”

The spy in our midst.

“Oh, right. Thanks”

He locked the locker.

Ruby said, “Cal, a reminder of Regulation 17.16 of the Firearms Code. Firearms held on private property must be secured in a government-provided locker at all times unless, 1. They are undergoing maint—”

“It’s ok, Ruby. I know. I just forgot. Ok?”

Ruby said nothing.

Private property. Nowhere is private! he thought.

He decided that he couldn’t download maps, or any other info related to escape—it was simply too risky. He made a show of reading the latest government propaganda while instead, thinking, waiting for Cora. Not really reading it, he scrolled through some of the headlines. ‘Leading Scientist Executed’. ‘Promising Results on Alien Parasite Cure’. ‘Pres. White to Alliance: Stop Protecting Terrorist City, El Paso’.

He whiled away the time, rehearsing his plan, eating, checking his watch. As he stood by the window in the living room, golden afternoon sun edged towards the horizon. He needed to convince Cora to leave with him. Last night, he couldn’t think straight after the tear in reality Dr Muller had unleashed. Truth be told, he’d been blinded by his own denial, driven by what he wanted to be true, not what the evidence told him. The nightmares and the news and time to reflect had brought clarity. The sound of the elevator doors opening, roused him from his reflections. It was 4pm. Cora stepped out, big smile plastered over her face.

Good, she’s home early. Time to convince her...

“Hey!” she said, placing down her handbag, then unbuttoning her charcoal gray, wool trench coat.

He smiled back feeling like they were on stage. An act. An act to buy them some breathing space.

No problem when you’re a mindchipped puppet.

She kicked off her heels, and as they embraced he whispered into her ear.

“Come join me for a shower. We can’t let Ruby hear us. I have something important to tell you,” he said before planting a lingering kiss.

She reached forward and wiped the lipstick from around his mouth, smiling, a sparkle in her eyes.

“Sure,” she said with a playful *what-are-you-up-to?* look.

Five minutes later, he made his case in whispers under the shower. He knew the risk he was taking. Cora was his wife, his friend, someone he would trust with his life, but how much autonomy did she have? And would she betray him? As he understood it, the Citizenship Pill nanites softened them up to Regime propaganda. He also knew that mindchips came in different specifications, but common amongst them were three things. Firstly, they placed the recipient in a societal hierarchy so that everyone had at least one boss. Secondly, they obeyed algorithms, and these were assigned from a master library—some by the recipient, some by the hierarchy, and some by the Regime. Lastly, the State Intelligence Agency had full access to all data accessible by the mindchip—the five senses plus whatever the chip and any auxiliary sensors could measure. Some data was captured directly, but most five-senses data still resided in the recipient’s brain. Recall of the former was perfect, recall of the latter was not. As far as he knew, they couldn’t read minds. And being *able* to access data didn’t mean Intel actually would. They’d need a reason. Their resources weren’t unlimited.

“I need you to leave with me,” he said trying to restrain his nervousness.

She giggled nervously as he pulled her closer, her naked torso slipping against his wet skin.

“Go where, Cal?”

“Go away. Take a road trip. You remember that one we did a few years back, don’t you?”

She seemed to relax, her eyes showing memory recall.

“Yes, when we did the Army families trip across to New England in ’76,” she whispered happily. “That was fun, camping out with all your army buddies and their families. But it was a little scary at first—there was so much security around our convoy and a lot of fighting going on in the distance. And it’s only gotten worse since then hasn’t it? Are you sure it’s safe?”

2076 had seen a lull in the fighting in the Northern American Union to the point where trips outside the cities were conceivable if escorted by the military. It was the first and only time they’d been camping together. Together with dozens of other couples, singles and families as a reward for the success of Operation Iron Fist North—a brutal quelling of the northern Badlands.

“You know I wouldn’t let anything happen to you,” he said. “Just trust me.”

“Fine, but why are we whispering? Why don’t you want Ruby to hear?” she said.

“I’ll tell you once we’re on our way. This isn’t an ordinary road trip. It’s a contingency plan for key military personnel and their families. It’s…”

He hesitated. She leaned back, looked him in the eyes. Her smile had faded, her eyes carried suspicion. Lying to Cora wasn’t something that came easily to him.

“It’s *what*?” she whispered tensely.

“It’s a contingency escape plan for times of invasion.”

“Invasion!” she said, her voice raised too much for comfort.

He pulled her ear close.

“Shhhh! Please, this is classified.”

He felt a nod. She said nothing.

“Invasion from the Alliance, from across the lake, from Canada. This city would be on the front line. It’s just a drill, but we need to make it as real as possible. Don’t worry. Just follow me when the time comes. Ok?”

“Ok.”

He and Cora got dressed in the walk-in closet. She put on her dark sweatpants and hoodie, topped off with a dark watch cap to ward off the chill. She put on her running shoes. Rae went to get his hiking boots and both their winter coats—puffy and waterproof.

“Ok, let’s do that long walk around the perimeter,” she said. “I need some fresh air after being in the office all day.”

They kissed and put on the footwear and coats.

“Let’s go,” he said, making his way to the closet in the study to get the Go-Pack, guns and ammo. He pursed his lips, frowning, tension rising in his temples as he donned the backpack, Ruby never far from his thoughts. Quickly, he spun the combination. Clockwise, counter-clockwise, clockwise again, then the final counter-clockwise turn. Reaching to open the gun locker, he heard a distant whirring.

“Cal!” screamed Cora.

She came running in, worry etched on her face.

“The Police are coming!”

He held her shoulders, locking eyes.

“It’s ok, just trust me, Cora,” he said. “Remember, this is a drill. It’s meant to seem realistic.”

She nodded. He grabbed the ammo and she put it in his pack.

“Take the handgun,” he said, passing it to her.

He snatched the M4 assault rifle, setting the selector from *Safe* to *Full-auto* before extending the stock.

“Stay here,” he said, leaving the study, the *whir* of the drone growing ominously.

He squatted down by the side-table in the corridor at the threshold to the living room, leaning the M4 out of sight. On rounding the corner to the living area, he saw it, outside in the fading light of dusk, Lake Michigan beyond. The meter-wide Police multi-copter hovered towards the floor-to-ceiling window, silhouetted in the half-light. When the drone’s powerful spotlights came on, he squinted and retreated into the corridor, squatting behind the side-table. The spotlights flooded the living space with illumination, casting harsh shadows. He peeked past the corner squinting to see properly, as the near-seamless emergency pane slid down, unleashing the rotor noise, gusts of frigid winter air invading the apartment. The drone’s advance stopped and it remained hovering just beyond the window aperture.

A deep, authoritative voice, full of subsonics boomed, “Calvin Rae, by order of the Government, report immediately to Lakeshore Hospital. You will be arrested if you fail to comply. Present yourself now and confirm compliance.”

Shit! Time’s up. They’re calling me in right now. They must know.

His mind buzzed at lightspeed, running through the options, his hand reaching behind for the M4.

“You have ten seconds to present yourself, Calvin Rae.”

He got up and stepped forward to face the machine, hands half up.

“Calvin Rae, stay where you are,” commanded the drone. “Standby...”

The drone’s spotlights dimmed, and a projected image appeared in mid-air in front of Rae—a uniformed officer, pallid-skinned, middle-aged, stone-faced and wearing an insignia he didn’t recognize.

“Captain Rae, I am Police Major Michael Zwicky, State Intelligence Liaison Department,” he said flatly. “We have orders to ensure you go immediately to—“

“I heard. What’s the rush? Thought it was day after next. And what’s with sending drone?”

“Captain Rae, I’m speaking to you as a courtesy. You’re a high-value Citizen the Government wishes to retain, but your behavior is irrational. You need help.”

“Help, huh? Is that what you guys call it?”

“Listen, I’ll cut the bullshit, Captain. SIA knows enemy intel are trying to recruit you. They can’t have that.”

Fuck. They know.

“Whatever you think you know, whatever Alliance operatives have told you, are lies,” said Zwicky, his anger rising. “The Alliance are under control of an alien parasite. Most of them become *Screamers*, but some don’t. We can’t trust any of them. Whatever they did to you on the Erasmus has blinded you to that. You’re high-value to them too. Once they get you, they’ll turn you. You’ll end up like those monsters... those *Screamers*. Constant pain. Constant anger. We know, we’ve caught them, we’ve studied them, we’ve—“

“Thought you had a cure!” he said buying time, thinking. The police major had sown seeds of doubt.

“I’m not privy to that information, but if President White says so, then it’s true.”

In that sentence, in the glazed look of a police major—who, in Rae’s mind, should be empowered and questioning—a tsunami of truth came surging back.

“Ok, fine—I’ll go.”

Zwicky forced a tight smile on his thin lips.

“We appreciate your cooperation, Captain.”

The floating image vanished.

“You have three minutes to exit the building,” boomed the drone. “Proceed on foot to Lakeshore Hospital main reception.”

Rae turned into the corridor out of sight, picking up the M4, then jogged back to Cora in the study.

“We need to move. *Now!*” he said urgently, grabbing then donning the backpack.

He knew Ruby would be feeding everything back to the authorities as would the CCTV network in the condo and beyond. But there was nothing he could do about it. All they could do now was move.

He kissed his wife.

“I love you, Cora.”

“I love you too,” she said, voice trembling. “Cal, do I need to take the gun?”

She looked scared, confused.

If she’s not armed, they’ll target me. And they need me.

“No, give it to me.”

She passed him the handgun, which he pocketed.

He kissed her on the mouth, took a deep breath and said, “Let’s go. Follow me.”

He advanced down the corridor, M4 slung but at the ready, Cora close behind. Reaching up, he found the fuse panel and deactivated electrical power to the apartment, killing the lights. The drone’s spotlights scanned the living area as it advanced into the room.

They doubled back to the end of the corridor where he forced open the one-meter square door to the goods elevator, normally used for deliveries, baggage and shopping.

“Get in.”

Cora, then Rae, knelt and crawled into the dark, stuffy cube before he pulled the door shut.

Using his watch for light, he ripped off the overhead panel.

“Elevator uses block power,” he said.

Quickly eyeing the manual control panel, he held the button marked, *Release* while flicking the *Down* toggle switch once. A light blinked as the elevator descended at a rate that made his stomach lurch. Cora made a squeal of protest.

“Hold on,” he said, wrapping his free arm around her, the other on the M4. “Few seconds, then out as fast as we can.”

Gravity forced his muscles to work hard as he squatted, waiting for the deceleration to end. The elevator softly halted its descent. He slid open the door to the service bay—spartan, tile-and-bare concrete, lit by harsh white light. Quiet. Empty. He hopped out, turned and helped his wife. Only her immaculately made-up face was visible in her dark outfit, accentuating her light eyes. She looked scared. No time to assuage her angst.

“Come on, follow me!”

They dashed across the space, past an idle delivery cart and a couple of parked autonomous trucks towards the large service door, closed to the chill night. Muffled, barked commands came from somewhere in the opposite direction—the direction of the condo lobby.

They're here.

He eased open the exit door, M4 ready, scanning the busy downtown street. There were throngs of brainwashed Citizens, Servile slaves carrying things, sweeping the streets, waiting the tables inside the *New World Steakhouse*, opposite. Autonomous cars buzzed past, delivery drones scuttled along the sidewalk lined by eateries, shops and offices. He turned left, keeping the M4 down low, pulling Cora close, trying his best to keep the weapon out of sight. Several people glanced, quickening their pace, one crossing the street. Alarmed voices reported from behind. He looked around. The crowd parted, the heads of two big, dark-clad SWAT men bobbed above the throng as they pursued them, shouting.

“Police! Move aside!”

“There!” one of them pointed. “Stop those two!”

Civilians all around them stopped, their hypnotized faces scrutinizing them.

Rae broke into a run, pulling Cora to match his pace.

“Quick, down here,” he said, ducking into a side alley, pushing a young man to the floor who’d stepped into their path.

They had a fifty-meter head start on the SWAT guys, but now word was out, everyone would try to stop them. The dimly-lit alley ran between two long downtown blocks—service doors and fire escapes but few people. A Servile man—overweight, Asian-looking, in kitchen uniform—came at him from nowhere, aggression in his eyes, meat cleaver high above his head. Staying in stride, Rae jabbed him in the throat with his rifle butt. The cleaver clattered to the ground as the man clutched at his throat, gasping for breath. Two more Servile men went down in the same way before a huge Servile woman sprinted out from an open door and grabbed Cora’s throat. She shrieked, clutching at the iron grip, panting, fear in her eyes. Rae spun around and swung the stock, smashing it hard into the attacker’s jaw. Her thick legs turned to jelly, and she collapsed. He gripped Cora’s hand and pulled her panting, stumbling into a half-sprint. Eyes skimming side to side, asphalt advancing through pools of light, he spotted it. He stopped abruptly, the rhythm of jackboots drawing closer from behind.

“There they are!” called one of the SWAT guys.

“Lay down,” said Rae, squatting down.

Cora went prone, next to him. He aimed the M4 and fired a short burst at the ground in front of the SWAT men, sending dust and debris spraying into their path. They rolled expertly to either side and took cover—one behind a dumpster, the other in a doorway. Rae grabbed the survival knife from its sheath on his belt and levered open the manhole cover, throwing it aside with ease.

“Climb in!”

He lit up the alley with more suppressing fire as Cora slid into the blackness of the sewer. A final burst, then he threw in his backpack and jumped after it, freefalling, then catching a loop-step part-way down. He scurried back up and pulled the solid steel cover back in place, extinguishing all light.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.

Nelson Mandela

Climbing downwards, the smell of the sewer and the acoustics of their footsteps hit his senses all at once. Cora panted but said nothing. Finally, he reached the bottom and his feet sensed terra firma. He clicked on the tactical flashlight on the M4's barrel, bathing the dank concrete tunnel in white light. Cora stepped over his fallen backpack and hugged him.

"This is damn scary for a drill, Cal!" she said, releasing the embrace, stepping back.

"I know, but we need to keep moving. They're right behind us."

She stood there, hands on hips, looking up at him disapprovingly.

Rae said nothing as he bent down and fumbled in his backpack.

"Are you *sure* this is a drill, Dearest Husband?"

He looked up, nodded, then found what he was looking for, before zipping the backpack and offering the headlight to Cora.

"This place stinks of shit," she said. "Of *your bullshit*, Cal!" she said as he donned the backpack.

The real Cora's back. No Ruby, no surveillance, no need to act, he thought, smiling.

"Come on, put on the headlight. They're right behind us."

She gave him, *that look*. Her withering, death stare. The one he remembered but hadn't seen for... forever. The prelude to a huge blowout of an argument. He held her shoulders, eyes connecting.

"Look, just trust me. I promise I'll explain everything when we lose these guys," he said quickly. "No time. Let's move."

She sighed.

"You're a dick, you know that," she said, switching on the light.

The twin pools of light danced ahead, lighting the way as their feet splashed through the shallow liquid flowing along the tunnel floor. He heard Cora shriek and turned to see rats scurrying past them.

"We need to stay quiet," he said urgently.

A metallic *clang* sounded from where they'd came, followed by aggressive, echoing voices.

"They're at the manhole. Come on, run!" he said, accelerating. "Ignore the rats, it's a sewer."

She nodded and joined him, their footsteps splashing along.

"Great date, Cal. You really know how to show a girl a good time."

Rae led the way, taking a left branch, then a right and continuing a circuitous route. Footsteps and voices pursued, and Rae knew they could be a kilometer away or a lot closer, such were the acoustics of the sewers. They reached a bigger bore, maybe eight meters across. Waist-high sewerage flowed hard, a noxious, watery soup of detritus and germs. He turned to see Cora looking down at it in horror shaking her head.

"No fucking way, Cal!"

"Come on," he said, chuckling. "It won't be that cold—the sewerage comes from heated buildings and ground temperature stays pretty constant year-round."

"I don't give a shit about the temperature, you idiot!" she said through gritted teeth as a suppressed shout. "Find another way. Now."

He jumped in, remembering to keep his mouth shut, then turned to look up at Cora. He smiled, extending his hand.

"Come on."

"Carry me across," she said.

"Fine," he said, wondering if he'd resist the urge to at least get her butt wet as he cradled her above the waterline towards the concrete bank opposite.

"Cal, you're getting my butt wet. Idiot!" she shrieked, punching his arm.

He sniggered, buoyed by their banter. It just underlined what a corrosive effect total surveillance had on them.

He placed Cora down on the ledge, then hauled himself up. His waterlogged pants felt heavy and cold, but he'd experienced a lot worse. They were lightweight combat pants and would dry quickly. They stood and took a breather, the rushing water masking every other sound. Cora stood and looked at his wet pants.

"You stink, you know that?" she said with the barest hint of a smile beneath confected annoyance.

"You too," he said, kissing her cheek, slapping her wet butt playfully.

Time for playfulness was limited though and he knew they had to move south, out of the city as soon as possible. They'd need to balance speed with stealth and avoid injury or getting swept away. Even a twisted ankle would be disastrous. And getting lost in the labyrinth was a real possibility, despite his best efforts to recall the sewerage system map from memory. Some things were a lot harder without a functioning mindchip.

Echoes of their pursuers grew louder.

"Time to move."

"Wait, how far is the canal you told me about?"

"Just over twenty clicks—"

"*Klicks?*"

"Twenty *kilometers*. But the perimeter's only ten. If we get past the perimeter, maybe we can surface. 'Til then we're down here with the rats and the shit."

She sucked in air, nodded resolutely.

"Twenty kilometers—that's a long way," she said.

"No more than one of your weekend runs."

She went to say something, then stopped herself and nodded.

"We'll be fine—I've done this type of thing a lot," he said. "I know what I'm doing."

"Right. Same as you *knew what you were doing* when Ferg and Chrissy came over for dinner. Epic fail on the soufflés, Chef Cal! Should've just left it to Harry. That old Servile was great 'til his expiry."

The last bit—about Harry the Servile—killed the buoyant interlude he'd been feeling. It reminded him that things *weren't* the same as before. This was still a dark facsimile of life in the United States of old.

"Let's move," he said, not looking at Cora.

She'd picked up on the way his smile had dropped for sure, but she said nothing, hearing only her footsteps behind him. They tracked at half-pace along the ledge above the flowing effluent. It hadn't rained for a while in the city, but watersheds didn't respect the perimeter and the sewer system had been designed to draw

water out of the city, away from the lake and eventually to end up in the great Mississippi. In other words, out of Sanctuary City, towards its perimeter. They travelled steadily through what seemed like a never-ending tunnel, until up ahead the roof sloped upwards, towards a grill-covered opening, shafts of street-light spearing through the ornate wrought iron. They stopped. Rae looked up and saw a few passing pedestrians and heard footsteps and the electric *whizz* of cars and trucks.

“Where are we?” asked Cora.

He checked his watch and awaited a GPS signal. It was a simple model, the only potential electronic emissions weak and short-range. He’d switched off those functions to before leaving to avoid detection. GPS was passive. No way to track the device. The map zoomed to their location—right where he’d expected.

“I know where we are. We need to keep going.”

“Wait,” she said, grabbing onto his backpack. He stopped and turned to face her. “You said you’d tell me what was going on... Now seems like a good time, Cal.”

“What d’you want to know?”

“It doesn’t add up... What the cop asked through the drone... About the Alliance trying to recruit you. About going straight to Lakeshore Hospital. What are you not telling me, Darling Husband, hmm?”

She was being her authentic self now they were out of the surveillance bubble, but was it an act too? Was she under the control of Intel and leading them to some unwitting Alliance operative? He had no way to tell. With luck, her mindchip was out of communication with the Net. He couldn’t get a GPS signal down there except right below the opening to street level where they now stood, so maybe they had lost track of her mindchip. He went with his gut feeling.

Now for a leap a faith.

“I got a message... from the Alliance...”

He told her some of it. The key parts. Not *how* they’d gotten the message to him. No need to reveal their MO. And not about coming alone. She already knew about how his perceptions had changed and what had happened on the Space Station Erasmus—he’d told her in the shower, away from Ruby the home spy. But Dr Muller’s short message from the wasp-drone was consistent with it, reinforced it, convinced him along with his own reflections that he wasn’t being played as the Alliance’s Manchurian Candidate. Quite the opposite. He’d been living as a puppet of the despicable Regime. All the evidence said so. He told her about going to El Paso-Juarez and the Alliance contact their codenamed, *Governor*.

She bit her lip, her face etched with worry before taking a deep breath. “You believe them... the Alliance?” she repeated, having already asked the same seconds before.

He nodded.

“And Cal, what do you think they mean about time running out now the American Union has ASTRA?”

He didn’t know himself but hazarded his theory.

“It’s an Artificial Intelligence build by the Alliance,” he said. “Whatever it does, both sides think it’ll give them the upper hand. I suppose whoever holds the most powerful AI in the world would dominate. Everything is networked. Win the cyberwar, win World War III.”

“But we already have the most powerful military in the world,” said Cora. “If we wanted to take on the rest of the Alliance or any other enemy we’d win easily.”

“Maybe we’d win—though not easily. War is never easy,” he said stony-faced. “Millions, if not billions would die. And if it goes nuclear, there’ll be nothing left to fight over...”

“What have we gotten ourselves into?” she said, her earlier lightheartedness gone.

“Come on.”

She nodded acceptance and followed him onwards, into the darkness. They progressed at jogging pace—well within his capability, even with the twenty-kilogram backpack. He could hear Cora laboring slightly, but he knew she’d manage fine so long as she didn’t hurt herself.

“Do you believe what I told you?” he said as he continued at pace.

“Which part?” she said between breaths.

“About what I saw on the Erasmus. About my understanding of how *we’re* the bad guys and we’ve been brainwashed and mind-controlled in a web of lies. About how the whole damned American Union is a lie! We’re slaves, Cora, pure and simple. All of us, whether Citizen or Servile. The only free people are the Regime’s elite or people in the Badlands—and who’d wanna be them? It’s all one big clever lie.”

He thought he’d said his piece already, but anger had compelled his rant.

“Well...” she said, carefully weighing her response. “I guess it’s hard to tell.”

The combined rhythm of their footsteps echoed relentlessly along the never-ending tunnel lit only by their flashlights, jiggling up and down as they ran.

“Do you *trust* me?” he said.

“Yes, of course! I *do* trust you. I love you. It’s just that... I can’t feel it like you. I’m just judging on the evidence I see before *my* eyes. I *have* freedom. *You* have freedom. We all do... I mean, within reason. But any civilized place has *rules*, Cal. Rules and constraints. We can’t just do what we want to do. The president is right—places with no rules and too much freedom are *shitholes*. It’s how Mexico and Central America and so many other places are so *fucked up*.”

Rae said nothing. He thought he’d won her over but now she sounded unconvinced.

“Don’t you agree, baby?” pressed Cora.

“No, I don’t agree.”

She pulled him back, slowing him. They stopped, and he turned to face her.

“Why not?” she said. Annoyance but not yet anger. “Look, I’m putting my faith in you even though I *don’t* see what you see.”

“That’s what faith is, Cora.”

Her eyes were locked on his as they said nothing. Then she swallowed, exhaling, her eyes averted, before nodding.

“Yes. Faith,” she said quietly. “Let’s keep moving.”

He nodded, her response putting him more at ease, although it was slightly mysterious, a little inauthentic. Was it artifice, a show of resistance for the sake of realism, to convince him her mind was free when it wasn’t? Was being underground blocking access to her neural implant? He wasn’t sure, but he doubted they had a direct quantum link to her chip as they’d had to his. That was high-end technology and simply not required, save for those in distinct roles like Special Forces and diplomats.

“Cora, you know when you went to the hospital and had your neural implant installed?”

The sound of their wet footsteps echoed around the tunnel as they jogged.

“Sure, it’s helped me greatly in my work.”

“Did they tell you anything about its comms capability? Does it have an Instantaneous Quantum Link? IQL?”

She pursed her lips, eyes up, thinking.

“Err ... no, not that I know of. Never been aware of that functionality. Pretty sure it’s a standard ANI-3b chipset. Why’s that?” she said from behind him.

“Need to be sure they’re not tracking us.”

“And are they?”

“Right now, down here I don’t think they can. Come on, keep up the pace.”

“Sir, yessir,” she said jestingly.

They ran on for another thousand meters before reaching a circular grating in the ledge floor. Looking down, he saw a ladder leading into the depths of the earth.

He reached down and jerked the rusty grating free, hauling it open, then climbing in.

“We need to get to the new part of the sewers.”

“If you say so,” she said, sighing.

Down another ten meters, the much newer, big-bore concrete tunnel carried only an ankle-deep flow but smelled even worse. He struggled to understand how that was even possible.

He helped Cora off the ladder, and she pinched her nose.

“You’ll get used to it.”

They found their way southwards, following a combination of the new main tunnel and older stretches of crumbling brick. They weaved a winding route, forced to retrace steps from dead ends—gratings blocking the way and, in one place, a completely collapsed tunnel. The place was a labyrinth. They stopped to rest and drink water purified by the bottle in his backpack. Nearly four hours had passed.

“The city perimeter shouldn’t be far now.”

They went on via a crumbling brick bore, damp and disused, a vestigial appendage, long-since replaced by a newer tunnel. His tactical flashlight caught what looked like a mound of rubble up ahead. Getting closer, it resolved into a pile of bricks and rocks and earth from the collapsed roof. He surveyed the debris pile with his light.

“Maybe we can get over the top,” said Cora, pointing.

He scrambled up the debris pile and turned to Cora who’d followed him up.

“Give me your hand,” he said, extending his, before helping her up to lay beside him near the tunnel ceiling on the uncomfortable mess of hard rubble.

They began tossing brick after brick, rock after rock, behind them, creating a gap. A small opening between the ceiling and pile opened enough for the smaller Cora to attempt. She nimbly wriggled through and down the other side as he continued hurling lumps of masonry behind him. He crawled through the tight gap at the top, ignoring the brick and rock digging into his torso. He got to his feet and joined Cora who’d already adjusted her headlamp to point down and was listening intently, concentrating. She put her finger to her mouth. *Hush...* He switched off his tactical light and listened too. Movement up ahead. Footsteps crunching on a gravelly surface. Then from nowhere, a piecing scream followed by a man’s voice. Angry, indiscernible. Then the *crack* of a single gunshot, echoes resonating until they faded to nothing.

Small caliber gun.

He reached in his pocket and passed the 9mm handgun to Cora.

“You remember how to use this, right?” he said, knowing she did but asking anyway.

She gave him *that look*. Not impressed.

“Well enough to have saved your ass before.”

“Ok, ok... Just... Never mind.”

“Grip like this...” she said, parroting his words from many years ago with unnerving accuracy, right down to his tone and cadence. “Now, take aim and squeeze firmly, keeping the gun level. There’ll be a kick, but just ignore it. Go for the chest—easier to hit. Two shots.”

He watched her take up a competent stance, raising the weapon, and mimicking the recoil of a double-tap.

“*Pow! Pow!*” she whispered.

He said nothing, just nodded with a smile.

“Did I pass, Captain?” she said.

“You’re good,” he said. “A smart-ass, but good.”

She came over and kissed him, then flicked off the handgun’s safety. Light bled around the bend from whatever was up ahead. Rae kept his tactical light off and reached over and clicked off Cora’s headlight.

“My lead. Be ready to cover me.”

“Got it.”

Weapon raised, he advanced quickly and silently, ghosting his steps, his M4 trained, illumination up ahead. From around the bend came artificial light, faint and diffuse, photons reflecting off the tunnel walls. Cora followed, a few meters behind from the soft pad of her footsteps. Slinking along the inside wall of the bend, they remained in darkness.

A gentle whimpering echoed along with the drip-drip of water, then the bark of the same angry guy they’d heard earlier.

“And that’s what you fuckers get for not listening! I am a *Citizen*. I am your fucking *master!*”

Then a *slap* and another male scream.

“We’ve got a job to do motherfuckers! I need to earn enough to get my own fucking Servile—one a lot better looking than you ugly fucks. We gotta get this fucking thing blocked off before the end of tomorrow and they’ve sent me useless assholes! Worst Serviles ever!”

Rae edged closer then saw the victim—a young man, skinny, dirty and dark—maybe of Indian heritage. Dead with a single shot to the forehead, his black eyes staring lifelessly at the tunnel roof. A miserable death. A miserable existence.

Rae gritted his teeth, his jaw clenched. Back flat against the wall, the narrowing shadow ending just ahead. He edged forwards, eyeing more of the floodlit workspace. Kneeling along the side of the tunnel, heads bowed, were half a dozen wretches in rags and footwear in various states of disrepair. Standing over them was a bulky fortysomething man, brutal-looking, no sign of hair beneath his white hardhat. He wore red coveralls matching his angry skin.

Need safety gear to keep Citizens safe, thought Rae sardonically.

Behind the slavemaster sat a pile of steel bars, welding and cutting equipment and a partly-built grating across the three-meters-wide tunnel. Pick axes, long-handled hammers, a ladder and several shovels stood propped on the wall nearby. The worksites he'd seen elsewhere in the developed world had robots and workers in exoskeletons. No need for that kind of tech here when they've rendered people as androids. Low-cost, throwaway humans. Millions more where they came from.

Despicable.

With the M4's stock tight to his shoulder, scope filled with Angry Bastard's head, Rae emerged from the shadows. The nearest Servile turned, drawing the slavemaster's attention. Angry Bastard paused, gun still by his side. Rae watched his body shape change, muscles in his arm about to contract.

"Drop it!" Rae commanded, his deep voice booming in the confines of the sewer.

Inexplicably, the nearest Servile jumped to his feet and darted in front of Angry Bastard, shielding him. Another two did the same, joining the first either side. Angry Bastard bent his knees, so his head was level with the shorter Serviles, wrapping his left arm around the middle Servile's chest. It made Rae's shot nearly impossible.

"Fuck you!" said Angry Bastard, raising the pistol, a sneering grin plastered over his doughy face.

Shit!

Rae kept Angry Bastard sighted, but his aim felt somehow less precise than before, his deactivated mindchip leaving him unwilling to risk the shot at the thin vignette of enemy face. As Rae lowered his weapon, he saw Angry Bastard's eyes shift. Cora.

Crack—crack, came the shots from behind, leaving two perfect holes in the side of Angry Bastard's hardhat, its high-density polyethylene no match for 900 meter-per-second lead. His eyes went dead, all electrical activity ceased as his muscles turned to jelly. A second later he collapsed where he stood, the faint crack of gunfire still reverberating through the tunnel network. Rae turned to Cora, who'd taken up position on the outside wall to get a better angle on the now-dead slavemaster. He nodded in thanks. She acknowledged, her look focused, determined as she joined him, covering the Serviles all the way.

"What do we do with these guys?" she said.

Blank looks from the standing and kneeling Serviles greeted news of their master's demise. The three human shields returned to the row of Serviles, kneeling at the end of the row. He couldn't trust these guys—they were chipped and if they weren't underground, they would probably have no choice but to report in and reveal their location. But he couldn't kill them either.

"Don't move," he ordered, still fearing they might make a run for it.

No response. Blank looks, still as statues.

"Right you guys, I need intel," he said.

They remained silent.

"Who's in charge here when that asshole isn't around?" he said, pointing with his gun at the dead slavemaster.

One of the Serviles stood, his look still blank and straight-ahead. He looked the oldest of the group—maybe fortysomething, but hard to tell. Scraggily beard, small, malnourished, dark-skinned like all the others.

The spokesman was no orator; his words were flat, simple sentences, single-words, never expanding his answers, responding only literally. Part of Rae felt frustrated at this convoluted dialogue, but the larger part felt

sadness for what the Regime had done to these men. Rae learned of the final stages of the project to shut off the remaining tunnels running below the perimeter. For the Regime it hadn't been a priority—according to the worker, nothing could survive the buffer zone outside the perimeter. Rae knew himself of the minefields and patrols. He also knew that the Regime liked to use deterrent to conserve resources. Nevertheless, they were all in a prison of sorts, captives of the Regime.

He stepped over and shook hands with the spokesman-worker who'd helped him. Rae thought he caught a glimmer of a smile but wasn't sure if he'd just willed it to be true.

Poor guys.

“Ok guys, get up and climb over the rubble pile back there. Keep on walking. If I see you guys again, I won't be a happy man. Got it?”

They stood, almost as a collective, their robotic, emotionless faces a disturbing sight. Unlike Serviles programmed for other roles, these guys were just physical labor, cheaper than robots. There was no need for the human touch.

So sad...

“Ok, whatya waiting for? Go on.”

They walked in file towards the rubble and climbed over bricks and dirt as ordered.

Rae and Cora left the worksite behind, jogging towards the sound of flowing of water up ahead. A short distance later, the tunnel sloped downwards. Up close, the flow sounded like a torrent. He explored the way, homing in on the source of the noise, his tactical flashlight scanning the darkness. A flood of water was cascading from above, filling the tunnel ahead. He crouched down and shone his light across the choppy water surface, which extended to the ceiling twenty-something meters away.

“Tunnel's completely flooded,” he said, standing back up and turning to Cora. “That damned worker *lied!*”

He scanned around, his flashlight zipping over the tunnel ceiling from where they'd just come.

“We're past the perimeter now,” he said absently.

“The work gang must've got in somehow,” said Cora.

“Correct,” he said. “We must've walked straight past it...”

He doubled back and kept searching, Cora by his side, her headlight now on, joining the search.

“There it is!” she said, pointing upwards.

This gun is liberty; hold for certain that the day when you no more have it, you will be returned to slavery.

Toussaint Louverture

He stood beneath the shaft in the tunnel ceiling, illuminating it with his flashlight beam. Cora stood beside him, unease on her upturned face. Every Citizen was told that outside the city walls was a killing zone.

“It won’t be that bad,” he said, trying to reassure her.

“I’m fine,” she said, her expression now serious, valiant. “Besides, I’m done with these stinking sewers.”

He leaned over and put his arm around her, kissing her cheek.

“You did great back there,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said with a momentary grin.

His attention returned to the old brick shaft extending about twenty-meters upwards. He explored it with his tactical light, catching sight of a cover of some kind at the top. Not a manhole cover but something flat, featureless. Simple rungs of steel tubing ran up the side of the shaft. He jogged back to the worksite where the slavemaster’s dead eyes stared back at him. Grabbing the lightweight ladder, he placed it below the shaft before climbing it, grasping the shaft’s lowest rung, then scaling the up the shaft itself. Cora followed closely, just below him. He placed his ear to the makeshift cover—a sheet of rusty steel. Footsteps on gravel nearby. Two people. One cleared his throat—deep voice, a man. Somewhere in the distance ran the faint electrical buzz of a surveillance drone. He peeked through the gap between warped steel sheet and the ground—dimly-lit, night-time somewhere beyond the perimeter. Then he caught a glimpse of boots and dark gray pants. Close, five meters at most. The guy clearing his throat seemed closer. Now was the time. He knocked on the sheet steel. *Tap, tap, tap.*

He called out, trying as best he could to mimic the slavemaster’s voice.

“Hey, can you get the cover? Got my hands full here!”

“Can’t you get one of them slaves to do your fucking carrying? Sheesh, man!”

He heard the throat-clearing guy get closer, then reach down, straining to pick up the cover. The moment it moved Rae pounced, powering upwards, knocking the security guard to the ground still holding the cover, his machine pistol slung but now under his back as he fell. Without pause, he kicked the fallen guy in the jaw at the same time locking the M4’s scope on the other guy, who raised his hands. Rae glanced down—the guy was out cold with the rusty metal square covering his torso. He maintained focus on the other guy, a short distance away.

“Right tough guy, slowly unslung the weapon and throw it over to me. Then get on your knees.”

A drone buzzed somewhere in the distance. Rae’s clenched his jaw.

“Come on, faster!”

He threw the machine pistol on the floor near Rae’s feet. It was a model he knew wouldn’t work without the registered user on the trigger. He picked it up and dropped it down the shaft, past the emerging Cora. She climbed out and took the unconscious guy’s gun. It too went down the shaft. Up ahead was near-darkness—the wasteland beyond the perimeter through which the empty Intercity highway ran. Just scrub, trees and bushes and the remnants of buildings. The leftovers of industrial life. The ruins of what looked like a warehouse

loomed in the darkness. Only its lower, concrete wall stood intact, the metal sheeting above it mostly gone. The frame that had once held up the roof sat half-collapsed. Years of neglect, fighting and weather. Behind him—a kilometer or so away—was the perimeter and the glow of the city lights. An old, dark, passenger van sat between the conscious guard and the city perimeter. There was no way they would've used such a vehicle further out from the perimeter. Or maybe it said more about how little they valued its passengers.

The smallish, Hispanic-looking, thirtysomething security guard wore a gray battledress uniform. Rae knew these guys were the auxiliaries that couldn't make it into the real military. Wannabe soldiers, low on training and usually given the more basic tasks. Tasks like looking after a work gang.

"Get over here and grab your buddy," said Rae.

The guy said nothing, just stood there.

"You need me to come over there and give you some encouragement, little man?"

Rae gritted his teeth and strode towards him. He watched the courage drain from the guy's face as he neared. Rae was an imposing figure and moved with an ease of competence and, when needed, menace.

The guy raised his hands.

"Ok, ok, I'm coming!"

He passed Rae, earning a gentle kick up the rear for dissension. Rae followed him, M4 trained as the guard threw off the sheet metal and strained to pick up his heavier buddy. Cora kept watch, her eyes darting around nervously as the drone buzzed somewhere in the distance, before turning back to the small guy hauling his buddy from the deck. Rae look to her and she seemed to read his mind.

"I'll go check the van for something to tie them up with."

He nodded and watched her turn and run the ten meters to the van, 9mm in her hand. The van door slid open, detecting her presence. Rae watched her stand back, covering the door with her gun.

Well done, he thought as she took no chances, before disappearing inside the vehicle.

The guard dragged his buddy to the van and Rae tied them both. He left Unconscious Guy on the floor between the back row of seats. Small Guy sat beside Rae at the front, feet tied, opposite the control panel. Rae took the 9mm from Cora and pointed it at the guy's side. He didn't need a gun to take down this shrimp but hoped it might dissuade rebellion.

"Bring up the map on the display," he said.

The guy paused, so he dug the 9mm barrel hard into his side. The guy winced, crying out like a child.

"Alright, alright, please stop!"

"Should've knocked *you* out instead. Maybe your buddy back there's more helpful. Remember this: we don't need both of you."

He navigated the map to the location he was looking for and set it as the destination, then used the handgun butt to smash the van's internal camera.

"You'll need to call it in. Tell them the work gang needs to move location. Alert them and you die. Use duress words and you die. Nice simple language, which should come naturally for a guy like you."

He didn't know what duress words they'd arranged—or even if they had any—but he'd analyze every utterance for anomalies. Any warning and they'd have a military drone lighting up the van in under a minute.

"Control this is Sierra-Delta-Two-One calling in a change of plan."

"Copy Sierra-Delta-Two-One. Please specify your change of plan."

Rae was sure Control wouldn't have the Public Works job schedule but wondered if they'd clock the fact that the new worksite was so far from the perimeter. Small Guard gave the coordinates to Control via the display—some distance to the south where the main south road passed over an old canal.

There came a pause.

“O-k... Err, Sierra-Delta-Two-One, I see that's an old sewer outlet by a bridge. It's a long way from the city. Please confirm.”

Shit.

Rae whispered urgently, “Tell him it's a disused terrorist rat-run and needs to be being blocked off by the work-gang.”

He repeated the baloney to Control.

“Sierra-Delta-Two-One... copy that. You may...”

Another pause. A heavy drone buzzed nearby.

“Control?”

“Err, what's the matter with your internal camera, Sierra-Delta-Two-One? I have no feed.”

“Ah... I dunno... Guess it's faulty or something. I'll get it checked out with maintenance when I get back.”

“You make sure you do that. Out.”

Rae heard Cora let out a long breath.

“Let's go,” ordered Rae.

The guard engaged auto-drive and the van negotiated the bumpy ground to the dark, deserted Intercity highway—no median, just a wide, unmarked road,

“Keep an eye on Sleeping Beauty back there,” he said to Cora.

“He's still out cold,” she said.

The occasional *thud* of potholes punctuated the sound of the electric drive and dirt spraying up under the wheel arches. An uneasy silence pervaded the cabin. Rae didn't want to talk to Cora with the guard listening in. The vehicle turned right onto the well-maintained Intercity highway—successor to the Interstate that it'd been for over a century before. They sped south for seventeen kilometers. Rae kept an eye on the outside but could see increasingly little as Chicago's light grew weaker. He tapped the display behind the windshield and navigated to the Intercity Logistics System's login page. The security guard watched silently.

No camera detected – use alternate login method

“Camera's busted—press your thumb here,” Rae instructed, pointing at the fingerprint-recognition square on the display.

The guard complied, giving Rae access to the schedule of road-trains. He filtered for departures after 2200h from Chicago on Monday, November 9, 2082:

2205 SC Houston 52 [Details](#)

2209 SC Seattle 35 [Details](#)

2215 SC Boston 24 [Details](#)

2220 FOB White Sands 88 [Details](#)

2230 SC New York 45 [Details](#)

2251 FOB White Sands 92 [Details](#)

2315 FOB White Sands 84 Details

...

The first three were leaving at five, nine and fifteen minutes past ten and were bound for Sanctuary Cities. He tapped the *Details* link for the Houston-bound road-train. Fifty-two trailers comprising foodstuff, equipment for oil well drilling, empty natural gas vessels and consumer goods. He checked out the Houston road-train's route and progress—it'd be passing them once they stopped up ahead. The Seattle and Boston road-trains were smaller and held nothing of interest. They would follow different routes out of the city—to the west and east, respectively. He went back to the list. *FOB White Sands*. That intrigued him. *FOB* as in Forward Operating Base. *White Sands* as in White Sands in what used to be the state of New Mexico.

"Huh..." he muttered, thinking.

New Forward Operating Base in the Border Zone. 88 trailers. Huge road-train. Then two more going there on the same day... And who knows how many before that?

"What is it, Cal?" said Cora.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "Tell you later."

"O-kay..." she said, eyeing Small Guard as he sneaked glances at what Rae was doing.

"Avert your damn eyes!" she said, pointing the 9mm at Small Guard, his eyes shifting immediately to the window by his side.

Rae tapped on the *Details* link. There was a pause, then a dialogue appeared. *Details Classified*. Same result for the other two White Sands convoys: *Details Classified*. After checking their own progress on the map, he switched it off and saw a pin-prick of white light on the road behind them. The Houston road-train, right on schedule. The quiet hum of their own road noise was broken by a moan from the tied-up guard in the back.

"What the fuck *happened?*" he cried. "Ah my fucking *head!*"

"Wash your mouth out," said Cora. "Unless you want another kick in the jaw."

The guard groaned. Rae chuckled.

"Where are we?" said the guard groggily.

Rae sighed. "Darling, get something and stuff it in his mouth would ya?"

"My pleasure."

She took off the guard's boots and socks and stifled his protests, jamming a sock into his mouth.

A few minutes later, the van headlights revealed the straight, vertical lines of something man-made on the road ahead. It grew into the superstructure of a rusting iron-girder bridge. Under it flowed the black water of a canal. Either side of the canal, the outlines of ruined factories and warehouses stood decaying and forlorn above immature trees and bush. A lost civilization, waiting to be reclaimed by nature. The van slowed, and its computer announced arrival at their destination. He used the manual controls to position the van where he needed it—out of sight from the road, beside the canal. With the headlights killed, the doors slid open and he untied the small guy's legs.

"Come on, you've got work to do," said Rae. "Go grab your buddy back there and drag him outside."

A worried look etched itself on the small guard's face.

Rae sighed.

"Don't worry, you'll live if you do what I say."

The guard nodded nervously and got to work dragging his protesting buddy into the darkness. Rae tied them both to a tree while Cora covered with the 9mm. He used the spare sock to stuff into Small Guard's mouth, subjecting him to his buddy's foot odor, before taking both their shoes and tossing them into the canal.

"Don't worry, they'll find the van eventually."

And you guys too, once your mindchips get within range.

Then they waited.

Rae checked his watch.

The headlights had grown large and dazzling against the backdrop of the perimeter, the rumbling of heavy vehicles rising from the distance.

"The Houston road-train," he said.

He crouched beside Cora in the undergrowth, eyeing the onrushing convoy. At the front was the manned Army escort—four armored personnel carriers in precession, each with a turret complete with a heavy-caliber machine gun, missile launch tube and sonic pulse cannon. The sonic cannon could take down swathes of attackers—either fatally or not, depending on the power setting. Right behind the escort was the powerful tractor unit pulling the half-kilometer-long road-train convoy. Fifty-two coupled trailers followed—some of them cylindrical vessels, others boxy containers. Another tractor unit coupled onto the last trailer. Finally, four more Army APCs followed behind. Rae looked to the sky and counted three armed drones, evenly spaced, tracking the convoy from a hundred meters above. Three military drones armed to the teeth and nearly a hundred troops in eight APCs with reinforcements on call. No pushover, that was for sure. In twenty seconds, the fast-moving Houston-bound convoy was fading to the south, its destination still many hours away.

After Rae and Cora got back in the van, he drove it manually to the other side of the bridge where the derelict factory stood, decaying and shrouded by re-growth.

"Stay here," he said. "Oh, and take a look for a tow rope. Nearly all vans like this have them."

He got out, probing deeper towards the collapsed building, searching for something they needed. The intermittent flash of light somewhere below the horizon, far to the south, heralded the distant sound of gunfire. A coyote called from somewhere closer. But there was no sign of humans this close to the city—a killing zone long-since subdued, long-since forgotten. Dead ground.

"Found it!" called Cora from beside the back of the van, parked by the side of the road.

"Great. Sit tight. Be back in a second..."

He neared the edge of the rubble pile which had once formed part of the vast manufacturing plant. Glancing through the mess of steel and broken-up concrete debris, he found what he needed and ran back to the van. Once he'd re-positioned the van and tied the tow rope to the lump of concrete and rebar, he dragged it to the middle of the road. Two more lumps of old factory later and the makeshift barrier blocked the entire road.

"Right, we're done here," he said to Cora.

He checked his watch. Time was short.

"Drive the van behind that rubble over there," he said to Cora, pointing to the wide pile of debris and ruins that had once been a working factory.

She nodded, got in the van and he sat on the ground and took off his backpack as Cora drove the van to behind the rubble, out of sight. From the backpack he removed the med-kit, a lighter and a silver space blanket designed to help with hypothermia. Cora padded back and sat down beside him, a puzzled look on her face.

“What are you doing?”

“You’ll see. Take off your leggings.”

She laughed.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really,” he said, smiling, kicking off his boots and pushing down his combat pants.

He took out the med-kit scissors and cut the silvery Mylar blanket, before thinking better of it.

“Hey, you’re better at this than me,” he said, handing her the scissors and space blanket.

He explained what they needed and why and Cora got to it, expertly cutting the space blanket, making a pair of leg tubes, each of which they fastened to their legs with medical tape. They carefully pulled on their pants.

“Now for the masks,” she said.

The silver mask, with slits for eyes and breathing holes, taped beneath her black watch cap, made her look like something from a horror movie. Only her familiar blue eyes detracted from the look of menace. He pulled up his hood and zipped his jacket up, before pulling on his gloves. Cora did the same. He donned the backpack and pocketed the lighter. Next, they both went over to the van, where he untied the tow rope, coiling it over his shoulder.

“You might wanna stand back,” he said, igniting the lighter and setting fire to the inside of the van.

Moments later the blaze was taking hold as they jogged from behind the collapsed factory and onto the highway and back towards the iron bridge. On reaching it, he and Cora looked up at the aging structure, then Rae checked his watch.

“This is gonna be tough,” he said. “But just watch where I put my hands and feet and do the same.”

She pocketed the 9mm and nodded.

The silver-masked Rae leaned over and kissed the mouth-slit in her Mylar mask.

“I know you don’t like heights, but you’re easily capable of this—just take it slowly, in little steps. We have time, no rush.”

She said nothing.

“Anyway, you can’t fall,” he said. “Look...”

He used the rope to tie them together by the waist.

“See? You won’t fall because I won’t fall.”

A hug of reassurance and she nodded.

Bravery’s not about being fearless, it’s about overcoming your fears, he recalled from his basic infantry training half a lifetime ago.

“Let’s go,” she whispered.

They slowly scaled the eight meters to the top of the bridge’s superstructure. The rusty trusses and dry conditions improved their grip and made climbing easier. They crawled on their bellies along the side-beam then took a right-angle turn left onto a beam spanning the road near the bridge’s apex.

“You’re doing great. Just hold on. You don’t need to do anything yet,” he said.

Squatting precariously on the cross-beam atop the bridge, he exhaled stale air against the flimsy mask. His watch told him three minutes until the next road-train would pass beneath. They’d need every second of it. The next two minutes he spent untying and re-tying knots in the rope. Specific knots that did specific things—

first around the beam, then around Cora's waist, then his own. Throughout, she moved stiffly and with caution. Her arms and legs were now wrapped tight as she lay hugging the cold steel cross-beam. But he had faith she'd do what she needed to when the time came.

Now for the hard part.

The headlights grew as the scheduled White Sands convoy sped along the highway, the sound of rumbling and high-pitched electric drives rising from the distance.

"Come on Cora, you need to get up and squat," he said. "Look, just like I am. We need to be ready."

Rae turned to see the lead Armored Personnel Carrier reach the bridge with a *whoosh* of displaced air as it passed beneath.

Any moment now...

*He that fights and runs away, May turn and fight another day;
But he that is in battle slain, Will never rise to fight again.*

Tacitus

Rae and Cora watched the armored escort rush under their perch on the iron bridge. Seconds later, tires screeched in protest as the lead APC's headlights found the concrete debris Rae had left on the road. The near-kilometer-long convoy following the four APCs stopped in seconds and the three aerial drones swooped towards the debris on the highway. They hovered above the debris blocking the road, observing, awaiting commands. The APCs' turrets came to life, sweeping the dark hinterland with their sensor arrays, their spotlights searching for the bandits that had dared block their path. One of the drones zipped vertically into the sky and buzzed around high overhead, another accelerated ahead to the south, the third hovered cautiously above the regrowth, then over the remains of the collapsed factory, advancing towards the burning van behind it.

"We need to move while there's only one drone overhead," he whispered urgently. "If our heat emissions are low enough they won't detect us on infrared. Hesitate and we're dead. Jump with me."

He held her gloved hand and they fell towards the trailer, sailing through the darkness. The hard jolt of the rope arrested his fall just inches short of the trailer's roof. There beside him, hung Cora with the rope around her waist. He pulled the loose end of the knot to release himself. She copied him, landing cat-like on the balls of her feet.

"Get down," he whispered, going prone, Cora doing the same.

He leopard-crawled to the back edge of the trailer. The roar of the van fire and the buzz of drones was punctuated by barked words from soldiers who'd left the lead escort to shift the debris blocking the road ahead. Rae poked his head down and examined the trailer's sidewall. Lightweight and low cost. Nothing high-security about the dry-box trailer. Any bandits capable of taking out the Army APCs, a hundred troops, and three military drones, weren't going to be thwarted by a dry-box trailer no matter how good its security. They were inside the security bubble now. They had to avoid detection for long enough to get into the trailer. He took off his backpack and withdrew the sturdy survival knife, clenching it in his teeth, before sliding feet-first over the side. Gravity pulled him down and he grasped the rim at the top and hung, first with two hands, then one, as he took the knife from his teeth and plunged it into the thin aluminum siding. He carefully sawed a line along the panel's joint—easier to cut, easier to hide the cut. Every so often, when the burning in his muscles became too much, he'd swap arms and continue. There was no way of knowing what was inside—hopefully something that would allow them to get in. If not, he'd need to risk throwing stuff out to make room. With the rest of the convoy passing the jettisoned stuff, that'd be a last resort. Four minutes later, he sheathed the knife having cut the top and side of the panel down halfway. Still hanging from the roof's rim, he shimmied along the siding to one side of the cut panel, then bent the panel down. Now they had a way in, the panel protruding at a thirty-degree angle with the opening at the top. He hauled himself back up.

"Gonna take a look inside," he whispered.

"Be careful," said Cora tensely.

Not risking the glare of his M4's tactical light, he hung his head down, into the opening he'd created and shone his watch-light into the trailer. What he saw shocked him.

"What the hell..."

Packed inside like sardines were people. With the watch-light, he explored the dark. Two rows of twenty trays, on each of which was a person, naked, on their backs, unconscious.

Asleep? Dead?

Most of them were men, but there were some women. All were from late teens to what he guessed was about forty. Between the trays, he could see that there was another layer of bodies below and, he surmised, one more below that given the height of the trailer. A hundred-and-twenty in this one alone. If all eighty trailers were like this, it amounted to thousands of people.

He hauled himself back up and said, "I'll slide in first then I'll help you down."

She nodded.

He needed to warn her about what was inside. They could risk a surprised shriek. It could alert the troops, or maybe the human cargo.

"There are people in there... Asleep. Try to keep quiet."

After dropping in his backpack, he waited a moment for a reaction from the guy whose feet it had landed on. Nothing. Rae lowered himself into the trailer and rolled the pack aside before helping Cora in, trying not to disturb or harm the human cargo in the tight confines. The dim watch-light was enough to reveal the inside to Cora, who gasped at what she saw. He pulled the bent panel back to vertical. The way he'd cut it along the seams meant it'd take close inspection to notice it. They lay there in the gloomy light each lying atop the soft motionless body of a naked stranger. He could hear Cora muttering something indistinct, clearly freaked out.

"My God," she said. "Are they dead?"

He didn't think so.

"Let me check."

Removing his gloves and makeshift Mylar mask, he checked the twentysomething guy beneath him. His breathing was shallow, his pulse weak, but he was warm if pale-looking.

"They're alive. Probably sedated."

Cora exhaled, calming a little.

"You can take off your mask—we'll just look like two more bodies. If we stay still, infrared won't see us."

"Who *are* all these people?" said Cora.

"My guess is they're Serviles. Hold on, let me check," he said, lifting the head of the unconscious woman beside him. There it was: the tattooed serial number on the back of the neck that all Serviles carried.

"Definitely Serviles."

"And this convoy's bound for a military base?" she said.

"Forward Operating Base at White Sands in the Border Zone."

He did a quick calculation in his head. Nearly ten thousand Serviles on this road-train and another two more convoys to FOB White Sands tonight. And who knew how many more? That all these Serviles were of fighting age could only mean one thing—they were conscripts heading the border near El Paso-Juarez, capital city of the rebellion. From his experience, new conscripts came in a steady stream. This was different. This was

an entire army. A mobilization. The ground was being laid for something big. Were they going to launch an offensive to take El Paso-Juarez from the Rebels? With the Democratic Alliance's security guarantee, that'd mean all-out war. Or were the Regime arrogant enough to try to call their bluff?

The muffled sound of a foot patrol came from right outside.

Shit!

He grasped his M4 and lay facing the panel siding.

A radio crackled to life outside.

"We've cleared the road. Get your asses back here. We're leaving!"

"Yessir."

A minute later and the road-train started moving. Twenty-plus hours in the eerie darkness surrounded by cannon fodder and then into the Border Security Zone. They needed to get across to El Paso-Juarez, to Dr Muller and those he now regarded as friendlies. Doing it in the middle of a full-scale offensive would make it far riskier.

His thoughts were shattered by a shuffling, then groaning noise beside him. Cora. He shone the light on her distorted face, which seemed to be fighting itself. Her body tensed and jerked in fits.

"Cora! What's the matter?"

He held her, tried to restrain her seizure.

"What's happening to you?"

No response.

He checked her pulse—off the scale. Her eyelids were open, her eyeballs flickering in the roof of their sockets. Then her face went blank, she stopped twitching and her body went limp.

Let every eye negotiate for itself and trust no agent.

William Shakespeare

Cora's pulse was fast, her breathing deep but steady. He tried to rouse her, but she didn't wake. In his experience, she was a fragile sleeper, but this was no ordinary sleep. Pulling open her eyelids revealed her eyes in rapid-eye movement. *Really* rapid. REM occurred in a dream-state. She was asleep—but in sleep of a strange kind. And the way she'd twitched and convulsed her way into slumber was anything but normal.

"Cora, can you hear me?" he said into her ear.

No response.

He kissed her forehead, then laid back half-on, half-off the sedated Servile, putting much of his substantial mass on the gap between trays. The poor guy might be a Servile, but he didn't deserve to be suffocated.

His attention returned to Cora. He wasn't panicking—she *was* still breathing, her heart still beating—but what had happened was something that needed both fixing and explaining. He tried shaking her, pinching, flicking her, and talking loudly into her ear—nothing worked. There were hours still to go, but this couldn't go on indefinitely. At some point they'd need to get out and go on foot. Preferably as close to El Paso-Juarez as possible, which meant as close to FOB Whites Sands as possible.

With his ideas for waking her exhausted, he lay back, quietly contemplating, only road noise and the respiration of the human cargo filling the blackness. The disconcerting surroundings led him once again to past horrors. He'd felt better on the run from Chicago, his mind occupied by the present. Now he feared the nightmares sleep brought. The faces of the dead taking their revenge.

Every so often, he tried to wake Cora, tried to talk her from unconsciousness, but to no avail. When he'd pushed aside his current worries, guilt from his atrocities flooded in to fill their place. His rationalizing then converted guilt to anger. He logically knew the Regime's manipulation was to blame, yet lingering self-accusations resurfaced. Reliving the days as a child growing up in New Zealand brought the relief of distraction. A slow, simple way of life in a small farming community. Innocent, happy days. The smell of his mother's apple and feijoa crumble as she used the surfeit of fruit from the trees in their backyard overlooking the creek. The chill of water fresh from the mountains in the stream near the bottom of their paddock as he splashed around as an eight-year-old with Eddie, the little boy from next door. Long summer days playing in the sand and boogie boarding in the surf he could still hear in the distance at night from his open bedroom window. Drying off by the wood fire after getting drenched playing rugby or soccer outside. Sitting cross-legged, looking up to at his mom's kind eyes as she brought him a hot drinking chocolate. He wiped a tear from his cheek. It had been a long time since he'd felt this way, a long time since remembering any of this.

What did they do to me?

Took away part of your humanity, came the answer.

If he ever managed to escape, he had a lot of explaining to do to his parents, living back home in the same little town. No calls, no visits, nothing in the way of contact. Maybe they'd tried and had their calls blocked by the Regime. Who knew? Hell, he'd barely even thought about them in years. Until recently. Until Dr

Muller had freed his mind. The mindchip must've somehow suppressed feelings of kinship. It was the only explanation he could conjure. Eventually, fatigue and the steady vibration of the trailer rocked him to sleep. Fitful naps, interspersed by drowsy checks on Cora, filled the time.

Hours passed, and daylight started to seep through the thin slits in the cut panel. Still Cora slept. Unless that changed, their chances of escaping in hostile territory were slim. All road-trains aimed to go from origin to destination non-stop. From his time in the military, interdiction attempts by bandits were common but rarely succeeded. The attackers generally fell in the first few minutes—mostly from the sonic cannons, which felled people like skittles and neutralized them inside vehicles. He had seen bandit trucks knocked on their sides by sonic cannons. Failing that they'd use one of the escort's anti-tank missiles. Then there were the military drones. Unlike the Police models, these ones used thrust-vectoring jet engines and could decimate attackers. None of this stopped the people of the Badlands from trying. The so-called bandits were mostly just desperate, hungry people. Not a fair fight. They were rarely well-armed—mostly small arms, unless a foreign backer had smuggled in more potent weaponry. That happened from time-to-time. Mostly it was the Democratic Alliance. Sometimes the Russians or Chinese. Foreign powers kept their meddling low-level, just enough to stop the Regime from pacifying the Badlands. Push it too far and the Regime would unleash another wave of sleepers or Special Forces on their enemy's cities. Rae knew. He'd been one of them.

As the day wore on and the convoy progressed south, he felt the trailer warming up. Sunlight streamed into the panel cuts, providing a gloomy half-light. He wolfed down some food and water from the backpack, trying not to overdo it. Still no change with Cora. He was responsible for her, yet impotent to help. She'd been there for him more times than he could count and now she needed him he was out of answers.

But then things changed. It was 4:20pm, eighteen hours into the journey when Cora woke up.

A soft groan alerted him.

"Where am I?" she said weakly.

"What happened? Are you ok? How do you feel?" he said anxiously.

With concern on his face, he reached over and held her, kissing her cheek, before checking her pulse—back to normal. Her eyes looked fine, if a little drowsy. Her temperature was back to normal. It was as though nothing had happened. But *something* had—he just didn't know what. She had no history of such episodes. It made no sense.

"I'm fine, Cal," she said, observing her surroundings. "Oh, this place... I remember—we're inside the trailer."

"I was worried about you," he said. "What the hell happened? You were fitting, then I couldn't wake you."

"I don't know, Cal... I don't remember anything."

He said nothing.

"Look, I'm fine now. Ok?" she said with a hint of impatience.

He forced a smile and kissed her again, relieved but still baffled.

"Come on, take some food and water and try to move about a little," he said. "We need to go soon. Time to get out of this damned box."

She nodded and took the water he offered.

A short time later, the trailer decelerated to a walking pace. The time, and the golden light streaming through the cuts in the panel, told him it was dusk. The slow-down told him they were approaching the Border Zone.

“What’s happening?” asked Cora. “I’m hot—can I take off this jacket and hat?”

She still seemed dazed, yet distant. More like the Cora under Ruby’s surveillance than the real Cora he’d enjoyed the company of while making their escape.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s hot—I’m sweating my ass off too, but we need to keep our winter gear on and put on our Mylar masks. We’re nearing the security gate. Once inside, the entire convoy will go through the scanners. They have infrared scanners there too, so the less heat signature we have the less we’ll show up against the Serviles in here. And I need you to lay flat on top of the guy you’re on. Stay completely still and the scanner shouldn’t differentiate you from him. I’ll do the same. We’re near the front of the convoy, so we’ll be on the go-slow while it goes through the scanner. It’s about a kilometer long. After the gate is our escape window.”

She nodded.

“Where are we headed to after we jump out?”

“Worry about that later. First, we find cover. Fast. Before the drones or escort or border guards find us.”

“But what is our plan to get to our destination in El Paso-Juarez?”

He ignored her question. Her body language was all wrong, but he didn’t have time to deal with it. He reached over and squeezed her hand.

“Come on, let’s get in position,” he said. “Lay with your arms and legs exactly on top of the Servile beneath you. And whatever you do, stay still.”

“Ok,” she said absently, following his instructions.

They stopped moving. Distant voices drifted across what he knew was an arid terrain of brush and scrub. The guards would be meeting a soldier from the lead APC, taking a report.

Blocked highway outside of Chicago, burning van but no bandits—must’ve aborted whatever plan they’d had. Everything to plan since, he guessed.

He could hear the slow rumble of the enormous security gate rolling open. A minute later the trailer accelerated to something like a walking pace. Next came the *bomp-bomp* of the trailer’s front wheels passing the track of the security gate; same again with the rear wheels a few seconds later. Rae held his breath, his body tense and still. They’d be passing through the scanner loop any time now. The trailer seemed to slow. Scanning equipment hummed as they passed through. Seconds felt like minutes. Then came the *bomp-bomp* as the front wheels left the gatehouse’s rear. He breathed a sigh of relief as they continued at the same slow pace. After another minute, he sat up and crawled over to the cut panel, sneaking a view through the left cut then the right. Outside, the light was fading—white floodlighting from the perimeter receding as they progressed, dusk in full force. He risked pushing the panel outwards to get a better look. Nothing towards the front except the leading trailers and APCs; to the rear, more trailers sliding their way through the diminishing gateway and adjoining double perimeter fence, its rigid steel verticals ten meters high. Crows’ nests—each bristling with sensors, floodlights and heavy-caliber machine guns—sat atop the perimeter at regular intervals. These tools of detection and destruction faced outwards, towards the Badlands—not into the quarantined Border Zone. He pushed the panel all the way out, then folded it past horizontal and down to near-vertical, leaving the side wide open. The

mild, fresh air of a November dusk in the desert filled his lungs. Inside the trailer was dark and outside was dimming all the time, with no lights on this part of the highway. The overhead drones had now gone—probably sent away to refuel. After that, he guessed they'd be reassigned to higher priority missions or another escort job. The Border Zone wasn't the Badlands. It wasn't a Sanctuary City either, so he knew the armored escort would stay with the convoy.

He turned to Cora, who was rigid, her body mapped above the Servile below her as he'd instructed. But they were past the scanner, so it was no longer necessary to be so still. It was time to move. His eyes found hers.

"Come on, we need to be ready to jump," he said.

She slowly got up and joined him, squatting by his side before helping him pull on the backpack. He reloaded his M4 and made sure Cora was ready with the 9mm. If they came across a foot patrol, fighting might be an option if they did it right. If they were lucky. But he knew they stood no chance against the APCs, so stealth was their best friend. He scanned the passing scene, looking ahead for concealment. Outside was mostly flat and arid, with some clumps of low bushes. Concealment, but not much. They couldn't wait forever. Once the last APC had passed the gate, they'd be at high speed again. Jumping would spell death. Or serious injury, at least. Then they'd be in no shape to trek to the southern perimeter and across to freedom in El Paso-Juarez. The remnants of the red sky had turned purple on the western horizon. Only a keen eye or nightvision would find them now. Despite feeling uncomfortably hot, they had to keep on the winter gear and Mylar masks to prevent infra-red detection. He was just grateful it was November in the sandbox. Up ahead, a line of foliage traversed the route from left to right. Drawing gradually closer, he could see their route passed over a stream. A concrete beam bridge spanned the shallow gorge, allowing the road to continue unhindered. Bushes and trees—sparse at first—grew denser as the convoy edged closer to the stream. It was still on the go-slow as its rear continued passing slowly through the gateway scanner.

"Get ready," he said. "In about three minutes, we jump."

Cora said nothing.

He turned to where she'd been, but she was no longer beside him, instead she was laying on her back, across two Serviles.

"Cora, are you okay?" he said, urgently checking.

Her eyes were closed, her arms twitching, then her legs. Her breathing was fast. He tried to rouse her—no response.

"Damn it!"

Not only did it scare him seeing her like this, but this was their escape window. He couldn't believe the lousy timing. He shook his head, gritted his teeth. They'd come so far, now this. Checking her pulse, it surprised him—it was *normal*, not the same as her last seizure and insentience. He drew open her eyelids, checking for rapid eye movement. Nothing but a glazed stare. This time he shook her more vigorously, but it changed nothing. A quick check outside showed the thicket of trees and bushes a hundred meters away. Turning back to Cora, she'd stopped twitching and lay totally still. Next, he held her eyelids open with one hand and picked up her flaccid arm with the other. Something wasn't right—her arm *was* limp but a vestige of muscle tone betrayed it. He drew her hand up high above her face then let go. And that's when she flinched. In that moment, he knew she was faking.

"What the hell are you doing?" he said through gritted teeth. "This is our chance!"

He shook her, and her eyes flashed open.

“Come on, get up. We need to move!” he said as a suppressed shout.

She looked at him, her expression one of calm confidence.

“Why are you doing this?” he said, pleading. “We won’t get another chance! They won’t stop again until we reach the White Sands base.”

Her breathing became labored, a pained expression overcame her face. She was struggling to speak.

“Cal... Cal, you need to—”

He shook her.

“What’s wrong? What do I need to do?”

She winced then screamed, her body twisting in agony. Then she seemed to steel herself and forced out the words.

“You need to... go... Leave me.”

Her eyes closed, her body went still. He twisted around to see the tree-lined stream passing at walking pace outside. He’d grab Cora and carry her if need-be. A new resolve surged through him as he turned back to Cora to see her 9mm handgun pointing right at him, her azure eyes fixed, deadly, unwavering. His eyes focused on her thinly-gloved trigger finger and saw growing muscle tension. Confusion gave way to training and two things happened. First, quick as a cobra, he went for the gun—a sideswipe to knock it off aim. Second, she fired—the crack of one, then a second shot, piecing the early night calm before he twisted the gun from her hand. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, his mind working at light-speed to make sense of it all. Anger returned to her face, and in that moment, he no longer recognized his wife. A cold, hard aggression had possessed her. She screamed, then grabbed the 9mm, struggling to regain control of it; thrashing, kicking, determined. He yanked the 9mm from her and pocketed it while fending off her blows.

“Stop!” he cried. “Cora, it’s me. Stop now!”

She kept going, punching, kicking, trying to get up as he straddled and subdued her. Nothing was working. The rage had taken her, and she couldn’t stop. He couldn’t strike his wife. He didn’t have it in him. But there was a decision to make. And then he realized. The convoy had stopped.

Shit!

Barked commands from approaching soldiers punctuated the *thrum* of an approaching drone. He released Cora and went to the opening, tolerating her continued, frenzied attack, his backpack absorbing her relentless blows. She scrambled to her knees and tried to grab him around the throat, but he brushed her off long enough to see an APC speeding towards them. An infantryman running from the convoy’s rear pointed at Rae before he aimed his weapon, scope to his eye, advancing as Rae ducked back inside. A flood of brilliant light pierced the gloom of the trailer—the drone was close, focusing its powerful spotlight on the opening. All hell was breaking loose. Cora had sabotaged their escape. And still she continued her frenzied assault. His mind was spinning. No training, no experience could prepare him for this. Betrayed. Trapped. Outgunned. He couldn’t delude himself—there was no escape now but death. The world seemed to shrink, his vision narrowed to the furious stranger his wife had become. He knelt there numb, ignoring her blows.

Is death better than slavery?

His vestige of hope won out. Death was the cowards’ way. For every moment he had control of his thoughts he could plot and scheme and find a way.

Cora stopped her attack. The military drone hovered meters from the opening, its light blinding.

“Place your hands on your head, lock your fingers!” came the order from somewhere outside.

Rae complied. He threw down his weapons and climbed out of the trailer. Awaiting was a squad of four soldiers pointing their assault rifles at him. They secured his hands behind his back with plasticuffs. He looked up at Cora who stared at him emotionlessly. Tears formed in her eyes, she winced in pain and held her head. A stream of tears ran down her cheek. He looked on as her face went blank, emotions erased. Then his sight went dark as the black hood came over his head. Captivity awaited. Freedom now seemed a distant dream.

I have watched men suffer the anguish of imprisonment, defy appalling human cruelty... break for a moment, then recover inhuman strength to defy their enemies once more.

John McCain

He saw nothing as they frog-marched him to what he assumed was one of the armored escort vehicles. The ongoing radio chatter told him nothing he didn't already know. A man and a woman apprehended trying to stowaway in a trailer. The soldiers reported in, confirmed they were taking him to the White Sands Forward Operating Base. It was less than an hour by road from the southern perimeter and the El Paso-Juarez crossing. That was where the Alliance's message had told him to go. That was freedom. Now he was going to White Sands as a captive. They pushed him onto a seat in the APC and he heard the rear door whirring shut. The electric drive powered up and they sped off, leaving the convoy behind. The soldiers said nothing. Rae still felt numb. Everything had been going to plan, then Cora had turned on him. He castigated himself for believing what he wanted to be true, believing she wouldn't be pinged on the network. She'd been fine in the sewer system and the wastelands outside Chicago while they'd waited for the convoy. Back to her old self. He wondered how much of her behavior was self-censorship due to surveillance and how much was the mindchip itself. Shortly after they'd infiltrated the convoy trailer, she'd had a seizure and gone unconscious for eighteen hours—most of the trip. She'd awoken just before the critical time only to betray him. The escape from their home in Chicago had been quick. Too quick for the Intelligence Agency to re-task her mindchip. Once down in the sewers, outside of network coverage, the hunters could no longer access her neural chipset; nor could they in the wasteland. But once inside the trailer, they must've picked her up on the convoy's network and tasked her implant. Maybe she'd fought it and it'd sent her into a seizure. He knew the feedback circuits were virtually irresistible. Perform well—in line with behavioral algorithms and commands—and happiness would bloom; do great and you'll feel euphoric; but disobey, behave outside the parameters your hierarchy has dictated and the misery could be real and unrelenting. He'd not been privy to details of the governing hierarchies, but he guessed population-wide algorithms and person-specific commands were in effect. And everyone had at least one boss. Everyone but President White, he guessed. And the punishment algorithms could direct anything from a general feeling of unhappiness to a physical, agonizing pain. Most of the time it didn't come to this though. Most of the time imperatives were simply planted by algorithm in one's subconscious, only to emerge milliseconds later as conscious choices. *The illusion of free will*. Follow those choices, feel happy. But that didn't always work, and the punishment algorithms had been added as a safeguard. It gave him heart that she'd found the will to fight it. To try, anyway. Her agonized face, her tears showed him that somewhere beneath the diabolical mind-tech, the woman he loved continued to resist. It seemed inevitable that his free-thought hiatus was nearing its end. But he would exploit any chink in his captors' armor, any chance to win back his freedom. Physical freedom. Mental freedom. Freedom to find Cora.

Half an hour later, the APC slowed to a halt. From radio chatter, he knew they were entering FOB White Sands. A few minutes of tight turns through the base and they slid to a halt on the dusty, unsealed surface.

"This is your stop, Big Guy," said the soldier Rae had identified as the platoon sergeant.

He and two others marched Rae along, still hooded, into a building, down an echoey corridor and into a holding cell. The door slammed, and Rae heard the clunk of the lock. Minutes later, the shuffle of feet and the

door clunked open. His hood was removed. He squinted under the cell's bright lights. Inside was a corporal and two soldiers with their sidearms trained on Rae. He could've disarmed them and left all three dead in a few seconds. But then what? He decided to bide his time. A full body search followed, the clothes they couldn't remove while handcuffed were cut from his body. He stood there naked and cuffed while they continued with more intrusive searches in silence.

These guys are like automatons, he thought. No personality, no small talk... Hell, not even any abuse.

The corporal and his men left the cell and locked the door.

"Get over here," called the corporal. "Turn around with your back against the bars."

Rae complied, and he heard the *snip* of his plasticuffs being cut.

"Thanks," said Rae, knowing they didn't need to give him this modicum of freedom.

"You are welcome, Captain."

Captain? How did they clock me so quickly? They hadn't seen my face until a minute ago. Cora...

He turned around and the men were already leaving. The vertical-bar cell was isolated from the corridor outside with its own small ante-chamber and a solid steel door with viewing port. No doubt there were hidden cameras positioned around the cell and ante-chamber, watching and listening. A chain-supported metal cot, thin mattress, and a one-piece stainless steel toilet-sink unit were the only furnishings in the white-painted cinder-block cell. On the mattress lay a single blanket and a neatly-folded orange jumpsuit. No shoes, no undergarments. He put on the jumpsuit—close-fitting on his physique.

Hours passed. He listened but heard only muffled noises—the type of sounds he'd expect at a busy FOB. It was well past midnight. Despite the on-and-off naps, tiredness had taken hold. His time in the military had taught him to sleep almost anywhere and to take rest when he could. Hunger had been a constant companion since settling in on the thin, vinyl-covered mattress. At least there was water from the faucet, even if it was warm and chlorinated. The bright lights embedded in the ceiling were unrelenting. He rolled over onto his front again and closed his eyes. While drifting back into slumber, the ante-chamber door clunked unlocked. In walked a small, gray-haired, fortysomething officer flanked by two soldiers and a slim, red-headed, thirtysomething woman with a severe, intelligent face, wearing a white doctor's coat. From his shoulder insignia, Rae could see the officer was State Intelligence Agency; the woman some sort of doctor. The gold-rimmed glasses the officer wore—uncommon in the late twenty-first century America—framed his hard, cold eyes. He got straight to the point, his manner tense and charmless.

"We know who you are, Captain Rae—a disgrace to your country. Everything you know we will extract from you one way or the other," he said chillingly as he turned to the redheaded doctor.

The redheaded doctor spoke, her scolding voice accented—Eastern European, perhaps.

"A man with your background will know the techniques we use and how effective—not to mention painful—they are," she said with a sinister undertone. "You see, amazing as our neural implants are, they're somewhat... *limited* when it comes to reading thoughts. Giving instructions—yes, they excel at that—but millions of years of evolution haven't all been decoded quite yet."

"So," said the officer cheerily, "we need you to give up your thoughts—to tell us what you know about our enemies. We're *very* keen to learn about their MO and what they have planned for you." He chuckled mirthlessly. "Maybe if we act quickly, we can have you all fixed up and working for us as again before the enemy knows about it."

He and the doctor looked at Rae, waiting for a response.

Rae said nothing, his eyes smoldering with defiance.

The intel officer cleared his throat. “The good doctor here has an interrogation room to prepare.”

He nodded to the doctor.

“Yessir,” she said and left the room.

“Now you’re a smart man, Captain. I know you don’t want it to come to this. So, I’m going to make you a one-time offer.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Ah, he speaks! Excellent. Your wife, Cora—the Cora. The elegant, talented Cora La Roche, admired by many, desired by many more. A real patriot, putting the higher purpose above her own selfish wants. She’s—”

“Where is she, asshole?”

“Now, now captain. No need for unpleasantness. She’ll soon be safely back in Sanctuary City Chicago, where she belongs. But after her husband beat her when she found out about his affair—”

“Fuck you!”

Rae watched the intel prick smirk cruelly, enjoying his distress. He needed to restrain himself—this was a mind-game.

“The population believes what we want them to—you should know that by now. Long gone are the days when your connection to mind-influencing forces was a *choice*. You’ll be a true believer again soon enough—that is my prediction. Ah yes, back to your wife. No one will blame her when she divorces her abusive and errant husband and takes the hand of one of our finest... After a while as his mistress, anyway. After all, we need a respectful period between one marriage and the next.” He chuckled. “And of course, he wants to try out the goods first.”

Rae gritted his teeth but said nothing. Unleashing his fury would only stop him thinking straight.

“Didn’t you know? Our very own Security Secretary, Mr Oliver Young, has a crush on the lovely Cora. One of many men, apparently.”

Rae’s stomach lurched at the thought of Cora with the ruddy-faced old creep.

“What’s your play, asshole?”

“Cooperate and you and Cora can live happily ever after. That’s it! No pain from Doctor Death in her interrogation room and a wonderful life with your sweetheart. An offer you can’t refuse. Oh and, of course, the odd death-defying mission here and there. This is a golden opportunity for us get you into the Alliance’s inner sanctum. A double-agent.”

Rae stayed silent, his stony stare betraying his desire to pummel the bastard’s head against the wall.

Intel Prick stared back, but broke his gaze, intimidated even with bars and two burly soldiers protecting him.

“Alright then,” he said breezily. “You have an hour to think about my offer before the fun starts.”

He pivoted to the door as the nearest soldier opened it. Then he turned to face Rae.

“Oh, and Doctor Death is *very* good at her job—but sometimes a tad overzealous, hence the name. Bye for now, Captain Rae.”

He grinned and left the room with the two uniforms.

Rae sat on the cot, stunned. It would've been better if they'd just shot him, but he knew they'd never let him go so easily. Like never before, despair grew rapidly, its malevolent black tendrils tightening around his mind, dragging his soul into the depths. Hopelessness had replaced anger, weakening his spirits, sending him to the darkest corners of his mind. He lost track of time as thoughts of self-blame and self-loathing overcame him once again.

He closed his eyes, taking deep breaths to compose himself, willing his despair, his anger to drain away like water from a leaky bucket. Once such thoughts had been admitted to mind, reason disappeared. His father had taught him that the free-mind always had a choice. Like the cavalry appearing on a nearby ridge, a hither-to unknown reserve of will arrived to fortify him. He thought of his father and chose calm over anger, hope over despair. Time was short—he needed focus, not introspection. It was logic, probability, estimation of outcomes that mattered. How things turned out would be utterly indifferent to his feelings—self-blame for the decisions he'd made long ago, hatred for his tormenters, longing and an unfulfilled sense of duty to protect Cora. He could cooperate and submit or be *forced* to submit after excruciating torture, sedation and re-activation of his mindchip. For him, suicide was never really an option. It was anathema to who he was, no matter how bad it got. The third way was *escape*. Just thinking the word brought hope, but the odds were stacked. He eyed the cell, sweeping every inch of its surface, knowing they were constantly watching. He checked out the cinder block walls and poured concrete floor—solid as bedrock, and with no tools, it'd stay that way. Under the cot was just more floor, and he could see that any openings in the wall behind the toilet and sink would be too small for escape. Likewise, the solid steel bars yielded little when he squeezed them, and the door was unassailable. He scanned the ceiling. Just more painted concrete with two circular, flush-fitted lights and a dark circle about the same size—probably the surveillance camera and mic and maybe some other sensors thrown in for good measure.

Caged and watched. No way out.

He placed his ear against the cool wall beside the cot and heard the stifled whine of an electric truck. From its volume and the Doppler high-pitch-low-pitch, it was passing by. This wasn't a maximum-security prison, it was a forward operating base—quickly and cheaply constructed and surrounded by a growing military presence. So, it didn't surprise him that the rear wall of his cell was also an external wall. With probably bare minutes left before that intel asshole returned, this new knowledge didn't help. He lay down on the cot and placed his ear against the wall again. Maybe the sounds from outside *were* a step closer to freedom. He listened as he thought through his play for the time when Intel Prick returned. One thing was certain: the only way out would be on the way to visit Doctor Death. He'd be cuffed for what he assumed would be a short walk. Disarming the soldiers while cuffed then escaping was going to be tough but not impossible. And what better option was there?

A sound through the wall caught his attention. From outside. He concentrated his every scintilla on deciphering the aural anomaly. Two men, hushed voices, indistinct but imperative. The almost imperceptible vibration of something metallic on the external wall. Then came a gruff, suppressed call, louder but still muffled. Scuffling feet, distant... sprinting on loose gravel. It took him half a second to realize the last thing they'd said.

Fire in the hole!

He realized too late and his world went dark.

Let us sacrifice our today so that our children can have a better tomorrow.

A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

The ringing in his ears gave way to the *rat-a-tat-tat* of automatic gunfire—some fierce and proximate, some distant. Groggy and disorientated, his back felt sore and beat-up. He spat dirt from his mouth and cracked open his eyes, blinking several times, clearing the dust. The once-bright-white cell had been plunged into darkness; flashes of gunfire strobe-lit the devastated cell through the jagged hole in the wall. He sat up as the door to the ante-chamber flew open, admitting new sounds of war. The armed man approached Rae's cell and squatted opposite him beside the bars. Late-thirties, stocky and muscular, desert combat fatigues and dark tee-shirt, his dark sun-tanned skin, unkempt hair and rough dark beard screamed *Special Forces*.

"Captain Calvin Rae?" he said, his tone husky, rich. Foreign. Australian.

"That's me. What the hell's going on?"

"I'm Stone. Me and my buddies outside are your new best friends."

"Who *are* you guys?"

"Look mate, we can't hold 'em off much longer," he said quickly, reaching into his pocket. The small device had a handgrip and trigger, and some sort of aperture at the front. Rae had seen the same type of device before—in the hands of Dr Muller on the SS Erasmus. The device that had deactivated his mindchip and freed him from mental tyranny.

"That's the—"

"Shush," said Stone. "Just look at the light."

Rae's eyes met Stone's and he nodded, one pro to the other.

Rae squinted as flashes of red light danced rapidly across his retinas. Seconds later it ceased, leaving him dazzled and wondering what it had done. He felt no different.

He noticed that the gunfire inside had ceased, and outside it was now distant and sporadic. Next came, the sound of vehicles speeding towards his breached cell, then jackboots running from the corridor outside the open ante-chamber door.

"They're coming," said Stone stiffly.

He put the device on the floor and smashed it with the butt of his rifle before picking up the pieces and scattering them amongst the cinder-block debris. Rae watched Stone throw down his assault rifle and pull out his sidearm.

"Here, take it," said Stone, offering Rae the handgun. "They need you across the border."

Rae took the gun and stood up as Stone slammed shut the ante-room door.

"Go!" said Stone.

Rae climbed through the hole and onto the now-floodlit base road. Before he could react, a squad of soldiers arrived at his left as an Infantry Fighting Vehicle came from the right.

"Drop your weapon!" bellowed the IFV's loudhailer.

On the wrong side of overwhelming force. Again.

Rae sighed and threw the handgun at the feet of the nearby soldiers.

“Kneel with your hands on your head, fingers interlocked!” ordered Intel Prick, who’d just arrived next to the squad.

Rae stood there, silently defiant.

The intel guy raised his pistol, pointing it at Rae’s head.

“Dare you,” said Rae, his eyes burning with rage.

“We’ll see how tough you are.”

Intel Prick wasn’t in the best of moods.

The nearest two soldiers ran over, cuffed Rae and marched him along the gravel roadway behind the intel officer. They passed a motor pool of armored vehicles to the right and the main block on the left, to a double-chained-link-fence enclosure, razor wired at the top, floodlights outshining the first glow of dawn below the eastern horizon. A single guard tower overlooked the enclosure, which Rae saw as he got closer was internally divided into four quadrants. As he trudged to the entrance gate, he counted twelve men and four women sat in three of the four quadrants, hands cuffed, shoes removed.

“Always the VIP, Captain Rae,” said the intel officer. “Got your own private enclosure.”

They frog-marched him inside and tried to force him to the ground in the center of the five-by-five-meter sand-floored square. His size and strength and their desire to keep him alive thwarted the soldiers.

“It’s ok men,” said Intel Prick. “Leave him. He can’t escape. Tell the watchtower to stun him if he tries anything.”

“Yessir,” said the soldiers in unison.

The intel officer exited first, followed by the soldiers who locked the double gate on their way out. Rae looked up at the guard tower in the opposite corner to see the intel officer climbing up to join another officer and a grunt in full combat gear. Immediately below the guard tower was a sign: ‘Enclosure #1’. To Rae’s right was ‘Enclosure #2’ and to his left, ‘Enclosure #4’ making his #3. In Enclosure #1 sat two men, with a third having just arrived, knocked to the floor beside them. It was Stone, the guy that had dazzled him with the red-light device before smashing it to smithereens. He spat blood from his battered mouth and looked up to see Rae. They exchanged nods, a façade of calm defiance on Stone’s face. Beside him were two other guys who he tagged as operatives like Stone. Something about their lean, compact physique and determined look that gave them away. One of them—a younger guy, light-skinned, blond hair—had a roughly-banded wound to his upper arm. The whole of his shirt arm was blood-soaked, glistening under the floodlights. The other one—to Stone’s right—was older, silver-haired, his tee-shirt sleeve ripped off as the makeshift bandage for his bleeding comrade. In Enclosure #4, to his left, were the other nine male captives. This rag-tag bunch looked somehow less healthy, more disheveled—much of it not from the night’s combat. Poor, malnourished men. By the look of it, many had taken a beating. Several of them bled from untreated wounds. One of them moaned quietly while his buddy checked out a nasty leg break, the bone protruding from his floppy, swollen lower leg. There was little Rae could do with his hands cuffed. Some of them regarded Rae, silently acknowledging him standing there in his charred orange jumpsuit. They looked on respectfully after he’d refused to be bullied into sitting down. And in Enclosure #2, to Rae’s right, were sat four women, hands plasticuffed just like the men. One was slumped against the near fence with her back to Rae. Her shoulder-length black hair ran from beneath a dirty red baseball cap, the dark skin on her arms was bloody and dirty as was the once-tan-colored vest. She didn’t move except for the rise and fall of her breathing. The other three women huddled close together, whispering, concerned

looks. Two of them looked Hispanic, one early twenties then other early thirties, both lean, undernourished. The third woman—the one with tied-back raven hair, a pale complexion and a strong, jutting chin—looked over to him. Not from this part of the world. European. Under her black combat pants and black tee, her athletic build told a different story to the other three. Her air of purpose, her physique and her looks said Special Forces.

He had no doubt they'd have mics trained on the enclosures—they didn't place prisoners together like this for nothing. Up in the guard tower, the two officers were in conversation, pointing at their captives like bugs in a jar. The raven-haired woman made eye contact with Rae.

He went over and stood by the fence.

"If they were gonna shoot me, guess they would've done it already," he said.

"So, you're the bloke..." she said, her accent British, well-spoken.

"Who are you guys?"

"Can't you tell from my accent, Captain Rae?"

"DASIS," he said, referring to the Democratic Alliance Secret Intelligence Service.

She nodded.

"No point hiding it from them. We all know what happens next."

"Do we?"

"Yeah, we do... Doesn't make it any easier though."

"You came to extract me."

She nodded. "That went well—"

"Hey you, Limey Bitch!" shouted the guard approaching her enclosure with another soldier. "You're first. Stand up and walk slowly backwards towards the gate."

She got up and backed away from Rae, eyes never leaving his. The gate opened, and they frog-marched her into the main block as the rest of the captives looked on helplessly. Feelings of guilt grew as she'd confirmed that they'd come specifically for him. He should've known right from the moment they breached his cell. As desperately as he wanted to, there was nothing he could do to help her.

The hours passed, other captives were taken. As the eastern sky turned from orange to gold, the sun broke over the cloudless horizon and the British operative returned, now limping and hunched, her hair a tangled mess, her tee-shirt hanging off, ripped from the neck. The guards pushed her to the floor in Enclosure #4.

Bastards.

The two Hispanic women scrambled over to help her up, their faces anguished, their cries distressed. She raised her head and was unrecognizable—eyes swollen, her mouth bloody. The guards grabbed the woman slumped against the fence, dragging her unconscious into the main block. Rae seethed inside.

Monsters.

"Why don't you assholes get in here with me?" he screamed. "Come on! Show me what you got... Bunch of fucking cowards!"

No response.

Over the next few hours, captives returned—all showing varying degrees of abuse. The only ones that hadn't returned were the unconscious woman with the cap and the guy with the badly broken leg. Rae doubted they'd be in the infirmary.

Probably dead.

The small, gray intel prick, in his pretentious gold-rimmed specs, came striding towards Rae in the mid-morning sun, as usual flanked by soldiers in full combat gear—this time a platoon-sized group of twenty-five men.

He chuckled and said, “You must stop having your little tantrums, Captain. It’s your fault this… this suffering. They came here for *you*.”

Fuck you.

Rae said nothing.

“Ok men, take the prisoners.”

At gunpoint, they frog-marched all fourteen remaining captives along internal roadways and through the checkpoint at the base’s high gabion walls. Rae was marched some way behind, following the beaten, limping captives into the desert.

“I thought you’d like to see this,” said the intel officer from behind him.

“You thought wrong, asshole.”

“You know, extracting intelligence is just like squeezing oranges really—some are juicier than others. We got some useful stuff from these guys and gals—especially the British girlie. I particularly enjoyed my chat with her. But others—the worthless Illegals—not so much.”

They lined up the captives in the desert facing the base, behind them endless miles of desert and scrubland. The soldiers gagged and blindfolded the captives as Rae looked on in horror. His rationality evaporated. He needed to act. One second later he did, round-housing the nearest soldier, knocking him to the ground before instantly sweeping the legs of another. Intel Prick ran towards the nearest grunt for protection, but Rae accelerated, ignoring all threats, launching himself into a flying kick and connecting with Intel Prick’s lower back. Rae landed behind him, got to his feet and dealt a ferocious kick to his side before the sharp pain of a stun gun floored him, collapsing his muscle tone, extinguishing his fight.

When he sat up, Intel Prick was grimacing and holding his ribs then dusting himself off, trying to regain composure. He hobbled over to Rae and kicked him in the face, then the chest. The pain was nothing he couldn’t take. He didn’t move, didn’t react.

“That all you got, asshole?”

Intel Prick gritted his teeth and poked his finger at Rae, looking for a come-back but coming up blank. Lost for words, he turned away and paced up and down trying not to lose it. Meanwhile, the sorry line-up of bound, gagged and hooded captives awaited their fate in the desert sun. Opposite them stood the firing squad—one per captive. Gone were the days when the military tried to protect the conscience by having multiple shooters per condemned. These soldiers were Serviles—their reward algorithm would probably give them a hit of dopamine for following orders. The intel officer ignored him and spoke indistinctly to the platoon sergeant, who ordered his men to remove the hoods. On the right were the three Special Forces guys, one of them with the injured arm. Next to him was the raven-haired British operative, her look unyielding, but he could see she was fighting pain. Beside her were the two Hispanic women, the younger of the two hardly able to stand. The remaining men—he guessed from either across the border or the Badlands—looked terrible. Unfed, beaten and probably tortured, only death or servitude awaited them.

“Any more trouble,” said Intel Prick pointing at Rae, “and you can stun him again.”

Intel Prick walked towards the firing squad, stopping behind the far-left soldier. His target—an early-twenties fighter, slim, boyish—started shaking. A urine stain grew down the inside of his pant leg. Rae shook his head in disgust, lowered his eyes. The young man was mumbling something, looking to the sky—a prayer.

“Fire,” said Intel Prick calmly, before a single shot rang out and the young man slumped to the ground.

The captive beside him sneaked a look at his dead comrade, as Intel Prick moved to the second soldier.

“He can live.”

Rae bowed his head, tried to shut out the horror. This was the system he was fighting. A distant memory emerged from a time before the so-called Renaissance, when history books had been freely available and uncensored—something he’d read about World War II, well over a century back. People liked to look back on the rise of the Nazi’s and what they did by setting them apart from the rest of humanity as though they were some purely evil species. They were Nazis not Germans, not ordinary citizens, not people like us. Now his own country had succumbed to the darkness. This was a system he would become part of again if he didn’t do something. He wondered exactly what Stone’s red-light device had done during the failed extraction bid. He felt no different. Maybe it had failed. Maybe it had done something else, not yet apparent.

Another shot rang out. Then another, and another. Then one more, each shot a human life extinguished. Each one a stab of pain to Rae’s heart. Somebody’s son or daughter, brother or sister... He raised his eyes. Five of the eleven non-operatives were lying dead—four men and the older of the Hispanic women. The younger one beside her was crying profusely.

“Shut up,” shouted Intel Prick. “Count yourself lucky—you get to be a Servile for the rest of your useful life. Any more from her...”

“Yessir,” said the soldier as the woman stifled her sobs.

This asshole would have fit right in with the SS, thought Rae.

“Now for our four enemy operatives. A very valuable commodity in our great nation’s struggle. Whereas those six sniffing Illegals will be off to a Servile processing camp, you fine people get to keep doing what you love. Only difference is you’ll be switching sides. Captured operatives make excellent infiltrators.”

The raven-haired British operative was shouting a muffled something through her gag.

“Ungag the lady,” said Intel Prick. “She has something to say.”

“I’d rather die than work for you bastards,” she said with vitriol.

Rae admired her resolve.

Intel Prick forced a mirthless grin.

“Easily arranged, but not going to happen. You’ll be off to one of our facilities—patch you up, enjoy some R&R, oh and some minor brain surgery to install the implant... Augmentation. Control. Something you’re sorely lacking. Captain Rae over there enjoys our latest generation of neural implant, as will you. He just needs a little check-up to fix his. One of your DASIS friends tampered with it on his last mission, causing a world of trouble for poor Captain Rae. Gag her.”

The soldier replaced the gag and withdrew quickly. Enraged, the British agent charged at Intel Prick, her hands still cuffed behind her.

“Stop her,” he ordered the nearby sergeant, who raised his weapon as the other three captives belatedly joined her. Rae knew they had no chance against twenty-five combat-ready soldiers.

A shot rang out and the woman fell, tumbling to the floor. She held her wounded foot, gritting her teeth. The three male operatives slowed to a reluctant stop in the face of overwhelming odds.

“Right, get these four plus Captain Rae secured for transport to their assigned destinations—Lakeshore Chicago for Rae, Phoenix for the other four. The six Serviles-to-be can bury their dead friends. Any trouble from the slaves and you have permission to bury them too.”

Rae still felt groggy from the stun gun as they pulled him to his feet and marched him straight to a landing pad. He sat beside the pad under armed guard. A military transport jet, arriving from the north, grew large in the cloudless desert sky. The engine noise and downwash enveloped his senses but couldn't wash away the dread. And what of Cora? Intel Prick had said if he cooperated he'd get her back—otherwise she'd be forcibly divorced and sent to that ruddy-face Security Secretary. That—just like everything else—now seemed out of his hands. They wouldn't make the same mistake again by giving him a chance at freedom. He had no doubt that the VTOL jet would fly directly to the landing pad on the hospital roof and he'd be back under the dark spell of the mindchip. But he would not give up. Never.

The muscular, stubby-wing jet descended vertically. Its engines died and the ramp to the cargo hold eased down from the rear.

“Get up,” said the soldier—one of four escorting Rae.

He stood and followed, bare-footed in his ragged orange jumpsuit.

Footsteps from behind. He turned: it was Intel Prick, looking smug and sadistic.

“Thought I'd let you know: the powers-that-be decided you're not sufficiently cooperative without a functioning implant, therefore...”

He paused for effect. Rae's heart sunk.

“Therefore, Cora has been persuaded to divorce her abusive husband and find someone more—”

Rae charged with a ferocious battle cry, but the strong arms of two men restrained him.

“You're a dead man!” said Rae through clenched teeth, his eyes boring into the smaller man who seemed taken aback.

“Not yet I'm not,” he said. “Off you go, soldier boy. Oh, and by the way, Secretary Young is very excited about his new mistress.”

He chuckled.

Bastard! I'll rip his fucking head off!

The soldiers frog-marched Rae into the transporter, his mind a toxic cocktail of emotions. He would never lose hope, but in that moment, hope was in short supply.

Now I've been free, I know what a dreadful condition slavery is. I have seen hundreds of escaped slaves, but I never saw one who was willing to go back and be a slave.

Harriet Tubman

Rae could only *hear* the flight back to Chicago. After he'd attacked Intel Prick at White Sands, they were taking no chances, hooding and restraining him with sturdy hand and leg irons. Restrained like some wild animal in the cargo bay, only the faintest hints of the dim red light penetrated the hood. Exhaustion overcame him quickly, and ten minutes into the military transport flight, he fell asleep. *Rest when you get the opportunity*, was one of the first things the military had taught him.

The heavy landing jolted him from his nightmare in which Cora stood at the altar with that fat, red-faced old crook, Oliver Young—the Security Secretary who'd claimed her like some competition prize. His amazing, hard-working, talented Cora reduced to a plaything.

The bastard will probably try to take over her business too and make her subjugation complete.

A burning anger rose inside him. An uncontrollably growl came from within, climaxing in an almighty roar of frustration as he bucked hard against the restraints, inducing physical pain in the vain hope it might lessen his anguish.

“Stop that, now!” came the soldier's voice.

Rae ignore him and continued his futile fight with the restraints. Two seconds later, the blow to the gut came from nowhere, winding him. He gasped to catch his breath then laughed insanely.

“That all you got, you dumb shit?” he snarled.

The next one was harder. This time he thought he heard the *clunk* again the endo-armor protecting his abdominals. It was there to stop bullets, but it was still embedded in flesh and wouldn't stop a rifle butt from winding him as the grunt had just proved.

“Pussy...” he growled.

The grunt let it slide, as no further violence came before the engines died. The hood came off.

“Get up,” said the combat soldier, who led him down the ramp into the freezing night on the landing pad. He shuffled across the wet concrete and onto fresh snow surrounding the pad, escorted by two soldiers down to the elevator bank. A short elevator ride later and he was taken to a windowless private room and cuffed to the hospital bed. The two soldiers removed the hand and leg irons and left the room. He watched them in the corridor outside, handing over to two police officers in full SWAT gear. Only moments passed and in strode a tall fifty-something doctor, balding with close-cropped gray hair, a Roman nose and restless eyes. Two female nurses in blue uniforms flanked him.

He pulled out a tablet, scrolled down. “Captain Calvin Rae,” he said, looking up from the tablet, his accent European, maybe Dutch. “I'm Dr Pieter Vos, Neural Cybernetics Specialist. Do you have any questions?”

Another day at the office for this guy, thought Rae.

Rae said nothing.

The doctor gave a perfunctory smile before clearing his throat.

“Ok, well, the nurses here will prep you for surgery.”

There came no pretense of consent or further niceties as the nurses cut off his orange jumpsuit, shaved his head and cleaned and disinfected his scalp.

“No gown?” said Rae.

Dr Vos ignored him, continued tapping on his tablet while one of the nurses inserted the cannula needle into his arm. The doctor took out a pen and marked up his scalp while the nurse attached the vial of anesthetic.

“Close your eyes and count to ten,” said Dr Vos.

He thought of his wife and how his brief interlude with the old Cora in the sewers gave him hope. Hope because it showed that away from the surveillance, and with her mindchip off the network, she was the same woman he’d fallen in love with all those years ago. If there was hope for her, then once they reactivated his mindchip, maybe one day his mind could be free again too. Maybe one day. Or maybe these would be the final free thoughts of his entire life.

One, two, three...

Drowsiness came. Darkness quickly followed.

What seemed like only seconds later, he awoke, drowsy, back in the private room, bright lights straining his eyes. Still cuffed to the bed, he now wore a blue hospital gown. As his senses came fully online, he felt an aching on the top of his now-bald scalp. Then came the face of Cora. He wondered where she was, what she was doing at that moment. His anger and despair accompanied those thoughts. Thoughts about how he would conspire to find Cora and escape with her, connect with the Alliance, emigrate, then fight the Regime. Time passed with only the hum of electricity and muffled sounds of footsteps traversing the corridor outside. Occasionally, the SWAT cops would look in through the door’s viewing pane. After a while, he noticed something. Something odd. Nothing seemed to be suppressing his thoughts and feelings as used to happen before the Erasmus. He’d just undergone an operation to fix his mindchip, yet he *felt* no different.

Footsteps came from the corridor and he looked up as the door open. One of the same nurses as before holding a tray of food. She fed him, trickling bottled water into his mouth. Bland food, but restorative. He finished up and the nurse inspected his head.

“How do you feel, Captain?” said the no-doubt Servile nurse.

He said nothing.

“Well, we’ll find out now the doctor’s here,” she said as Dr Vos entered.

Behind him, two auxiliaries were rolling in a device, which looked like a stainless-steel cantilever floor lamp. Its base was on casters and a short vertical tube hung suspended at the end of its articulated arm.

“Good morning, Captain,” said Dr Vos.

“What time is it?”

“Around 5am,” said the doctor. “Everything went surprisingly smoothly in surgery. Now we just need to—”

“Surprising in what way?” said Rae.

“Well, surprising because they told me your neural implant probably needed replacing—but it turned out that it did not.”

“Over here, please men,” said the doctor to the auxiliaries, directing the device on casters into position.

The tube hung a meter above Rae’s face.

“This is a diagnostics scanner—it will verify that the neural implant is still functioning. Direct connection diagnostics in the operating room showed all hardware, firmware and algorithms performing within tolerance. This is the last check before discharge.”

The bed’s backrest angled to near-vertical before the diagnostic tube descended over Rae’s head, gently bottoming out on his shoulders. Only a repetitive hum and the quiet self-addressed remarks of Dr Vos gave him any hint that his brain was being scanned. The tube withdrew, and the auxiliaries trundled away with the scanner.

“Well, that confirms it—you’re good to go, Captain Rae,” said Dr Vos. “Guards—you can uncuff him.”

The SWAT guys entered. The smaller one said, “Is he now loyal?”

“Yes, officer—he’s back in the fold,” replied Dr Vos.

The SWAT guy tapped a pad on his lower left sleeve and a cover slid open revealing a small touchscreen.

“Read the declaration, doctor,” he said. “You are certifying that this man is no longer a prisoner and is free to go about his business as a Citizen of the American Union.”

The doctor scanned the text briefly, looked up and nodded.

“Place your thumb print here, confirming you agree.”

He pressed his thumb on the pad, the cop checked, then cover slid shut.

“Good bye and good luck, Calvin Rae,” said the doctor, leaving the room.

The SWAT guys unshackled Rae and walked off without a word. Lying there in his gown, no clothes to his name, he went looking for a nurse in the corridor. It was snowing outside and even the elevated walkways would be chilly—no way was he going home in this gown...

Home. Cora. That bastard had threatened some trumped-up charge of abuse and divorce, conspired to take his wife like a chattel. What had they done with her? Where *was* she? Every time he thought of her now, there came a stab of pain to his heart, accompanied by a seething anger at the injustice of it.

Nothing is sacred to the Regime. Even marriage. Even love.

His hope against hope held out the slim chance she’d be there at home, waiting for him like nothing had changed. Even the on-stage Cora in the surveillance bubble, under the mindchip’s spell would be better than losing her. But one thing he knew for sure: he would stop at nothing to find her and exfiltrate. He was under no illusion though—they would be more closely watched than ever by the State Intelligence Service.

The nurse at the nurses’ station agreed to get him some clothes but told him it’d take a while and to go wait in the room. He returned to the room and put on the TV, slouching languidly on the bed. As usual, propaganda masquerading as news filled the schedule. He knew he’d lapped up the regime’s propaganda prior to Dr Muller’s red-light device. Somehow, his post-Erasmus skepticism hadn’t waned, even now, even after they’d fixed his chip. A story about the alien parasite came on screen. According to the anchor, Screemers were now spreading across the Military Operations Zone. They cut to an MOZ correspondent, an overly animated twentysomething woman, too small for her blue combat gear.

“That’s right, David,” she said to the anchorman. “I’m in an undisclosed location in the MOZ, at an Army-run facility.”

The camera panned to a dirty concrete pit in what looked like some sort of dimly-lit warehouse. In the pit, Rae counted five bedraggled figures—two men, three women—chained to the floor in leg irons. They looked up into the camera light, their faces pitiful and desperate.

The reporter continued, “As you can see behind me, these poor souls are infected, transformed into hideous Screammers by the alien parasite that has spread from Europe.”

Rae got up and stood closer to the screen, examining the five captives, looking for the Screammers he knew the augmented reality algorithm would show. Nothing. They were as human as the next person. That could only mean one thing—his neural implant was still not working.

He stared in disbelief and sat down. Somewhere in his thoughts, a faint hope had been rekindled.

“As we heard earlier, David,” continued the TV, “the cure *is* going to be rolled before the end of this year.”

How could it be that he felt no different, no longer saw Screammers on cue, even though diagnostics showed the mindchip *was* working? Dr Vos had signed him off. The diagnostics would have been verified by other experts—in theatre and remotely by the implant-makers. Could Dr Vos be an Alliance agent? Could he somehow sign off Rae’s mindchip and get it past the verifiers? Maybe. Unlikely though. The verifiers would be remote, independent, overseen by the State Intelligence Agency. Rae was free—both physically and mentally, but how? The outside world faded as he dived deep into thought, mulling all the possible explanations he could think of. One made more sense than any other: White Sands, imprisonment, the Alliance raid and Stone. The Alliance operative had used a red-light device just like Dr Muller had on the SS Erasmus. Had he somehow re-programmed the mindchip? Done it in such a way that it passed diagnostics yet left him free? If true, Rae would need to play along, use it to his advantage, work against the Regime.

The nurse arrived with clothes.

“Sorry, no coat...”

He got dressed in the basic outfit—undergarments, jeans and sweatshirt. The shoes were unbranded sports shoes and didn’t fit properly. After discharging himself at the front desk, he took the Skywalk. The part-heated walkways were frigid in the winter chill. The shaved head didn’t help. He passed a window; the bluish early morning light of the overcast sky revealed a frozen Lake Michigan. The few people around that early on Saturday were almost exclusively Serviles. He headed to what was, until three days ago, his home. Was it still or had they taken that away too? He quickened his pace, dread growing with every step towards the realization of something bad. None of the possible outcomes were good—only less bad. Best case: Cora would be there, and he’d have a chance to speak with her, find some way to keep her. Worst case: she was gone and he was locked out and the police were waiting to arrest him on trumped-up charges of spousal abuse. His heart pounded, anxiety rising from his gut, his pace accelerating to a near jog.

Minutes later he took the elevator up to the grand entrance of *One Renaissance*, arriving at the private elevator in the lobby at exactly 7am. The same ageing bellhop who Cora said would be ‘retired’, offered to assist, but Rae declined and ascended to the one-hundred-eighty-fifth floor alone. The door slid open. His stomach dropped. Silence greeted him. The apartment seemed different, empty, lifeless. He stepped in and felt the chill. The lights were all off, the only source of illumination the cold light through the wall of plate-glass windows. Some of the furniture and many other items were missing.

“Welcome home, Cal,” said Ruby the AI home assistant.

Spy.

“Hello, Ruby,” he said. “Where’s Cora?”

“Cora no longer resides here, Cal.”

His legs felt weak, his body went numb as he absorbed the reality of it. He fell to his knees, heart racing, lightheaded. He wanted to speak between panted breaths, but no words came. Still wordless, his lips like jelly, his forehead sank to the carpet. Only now did losing Cora feel real. He stayed on his knees, head bowed as if in prayer, his breathing frantic, his mind a disorganized mess of fragmentary thoughts.

After some time, he realized that Ruby had stayed silent. Self-preservation kicked in as he wondered what Ruby was thinking and whether she would report his behavior. He’d be no good to Cora if they found out his mindchip was still inactive. He sucked in deep breaths, holding them for a few seconds and releasing, trying to get a grip on his emotions. Slowly, he got back to his feet, steadying himself against the wall, his stomach still weak, his heart still thumping. Wiping sweat off his brow, he cleared his throat and forced out some croaky words.

“Where... Where *does* she live?”

“I’m not authorized to give you her new address,” said Ruby cordially, as though his state had zero meaning to her.

He sighed, shaking his bowed head.

“What the hell do I do now?” he muttered only to himself, tears welling in his eyes.

He looked around in the cold morning light and suppressed the urge to sob, blinking away the tears.

“Ruby... lights on, heating to twenty-one Celsius.”

“Of course, Cal.”

He guessed it was still *his* place. They hadn’t taken away his home. But without Cora it was no longer a *home*, just an apartment, a place to sleep. In a way it was psychological punishment, with constant reminders of what he’d lost.

Bastards.

He started towards the open-plan kitchen, passing photos of happier times on the wall. Had they left them deliberately to twist the knife some more? Regardless, he stopped and looked at the photos. One from their wedding ceremony. Another of them formally dressed for a fashion award ceremony where she’d won Young Designer of the Year in 2080. And a candid photo of the two of them, cheek to cheek, smiling, at their wedding receipt in 2074.

Bastards are definitely fucking with me, leaving these here.

Seeing them fortified his resolve—he would do everything in his power to get her back and undo this injustice. He would get her back and escape or die trying.

The sound of a man clearing his throat interrupted his angry thoughts, startling him.

“Hello Captain, so nice to see you again. The skin-head suits you.”

Instantly, he recognized that smug, mocking tone. When Rae turned around he fought hard not to react. With his jaw clenched, he intentionally controlled his breathing, kept his expression neutral. It was Intel Prick—that diminutive, bespectacled demon who’d played God with the lives of the brave insurgents that’d tried to rescue him. The urge to rip his fucking head off was strong. It took everything he had to keep it inside. He was sat on a dining chair in the corner the room, beside the window overlooking the frozen Lake Michigan. He wore

the dark dress uniform of the militarized SIA and had a name tape on his chest. 'Dudek'. So *that* was the bastard's name. On either side of Dudek stood a brawny masked Marine in full combat gear.

Rae forced a smile, resisting the urge to say, *Get the fuck out*. He needed to play it smart and not let the prick get under his skin, play the obedient Citizen.

"Oh, hi there," he said amiably. "What brings you here?"

The intel officer smiled tightly.

"Ah, a much better attitude now they've fixed that faulty mindchip of yours. No recital for you today, Captain?"

Rae stood to attention and recited, "Hail President White! Hail the Renaissance! Freedom Through Struggle!"

Dudek replied with the same.

"At ease, Captain," he said. "You know, you really are a nicer person with it working. And, more to the point, a more *useful* person. More truthful too, I hope. I must confess, it would've been a great shame to have lost a man of your talents. Now you're batting for the good guys again, I should introduce myself properly—no need for the cloak and dagger stuff anymore."

Dudek got to his feet and stood like a miniature between the two watchful marines, offering a handshake.

"Major William Dudek, State Intelligence Agency."

Rae stepped forward and forced himself to shake hands.

"Nice to finally know your name, sir."

I'd like to punch your fucking lights out.

"Come. Join me," said Dudek.

Rae retrieved a dining chair from the table nearby and sat opposite him. The sociopath's cold eyes tracked him all the way.

"I do apologize for locking you up last time we met."

"I understand, sir."

"Being incarcerated by your own side is never nice for men like us," said Dudek, his eyes looking past Rae, recalling something. He chuckled, his icy gaze returning to Rae. "You know I have a lot to thank General Hood for."

"Do you?"

"Yes, it was the year before the Renaissance. I was in the stockade awaiting court martial for supposed war crimes. Trumped-up charges. Once General Hood gained control, he saw my potential and had the case dropped."

"Yessir," said Rae, not knowing what else to say. Easy to believe. Except for the trumped-up part.

"Time to get down to business, Captain. We extracted most of what we needed from Cora and other sources—"

"Where is she?" said Rae, panic edging into his voice.

A puzzled look crossed Dudek's face. He paused, eyeing Rae intently.

"Hmm... She had to leave you and will be filing for divorce. Come on, Captain, I thought we went through this."

“Yes of course, sir,” he said apologetically. “The doctor said there may be some sub-optimal memory recall in the short-term.”

It pained him to call Dudek *sir*, but it was a means to an end.

“That’s fine, Captain—you’ve been through a lot. You know, I once had a wife too...”

“What happened, sir?”

Dudek’s eyes wandered from Rae and settled at a point, somewhere at infinity.

“I really did love her... She—she fled the country five years ago... on one of the final Traitor Flights, after the Sanctuaries Act of 2077. She...”

His voice trailed off, his eyes narrowed, hardening as they focused back on Rae. The change was frightening to observe. The neural chip had probably slammed the door on his emotions.

“Bottom line: she was a damned traitor and deserves what all traitors deserve. Now, back to business...”

Rae nodded, playing along, eager to please.

“We know about the enemy’s attempt to recruit you, your escape from the Police and the stowaways’ journey you took with your wife to *FOB White Sands*.”

“Is there anything I can tell you, sir?” said Rae.

“As it happens, yes there is. Clearly you were trying to reach El Paso-Juarez—the enemy stronghold just across the border from *FOB White Sands*. How did they pass the message to you, Captain?”

He had to give him something plausible but didn’t want to give up the DASIS MO of using wasp drones. That would lead to counter measures. He knew there was a good chance they’d know about the cryptic email leading to the Wiki page about Kristallnacht, and maybe even up to and including the mouse-over tooltip telling him to water the houseplants. It was a signal for the wasp drone to come. It was this last step—the wasp drone—that he knew he should conceal.

“There was a message... Written on a piece of paper hidden in one of the potted plants.”

He pointed to the snake plant by the window.

“I don’t know how the piece of paper got there, but it said to come to El Paso-Juarez and find someone called The Governor.”

Keep the lie close to the truth.

Dudek nodded in recognition at the name.

“What was the purpose of going there?”

“It wasn’t stated.”

“Why did you go then?”

“As you probably know, the EMP device the enemy Screamer used on Erasmus fried my neural implant somehow. It made me believe that the Democratic Alliance were fighting the good fight, sir. Trying to release us from tyranny.”

“And now you know that’s the opposite of the truth, right Captain?”

“Of course, sir. *They* are under the control of a tyranny in the form of the alien parasite, sir.”

“Good. So, can you remember the actual words on this piece of paper?”

“No, sir. Not the exact words. As I said, my neural—”

“Yes, yes. So, what happened to the piece of paper?”

“I destroyed it as it said to do on the paper.”

“How?”

The first answer that came to mind was to tell him he’d flushed it down the toilet. But Ruby, the friendly domestic spy would know.

“I tore it up and disposed of it in the sewer system. Threw it into the flow.”

“Did the message mention the ASTRA AI or the mission to extract it?”

“No, sir.”

“And how’d you think it got there, the paper message?”

“Guess someone must’ve put it there, got inside this place. These guys are spies after all.”

“Hmm...” Dudek stroked his chin, brow furrowed. “Maybe your Ruby knows.”

Rae said nothing.

“Ruby, did you see Captain Rae retrieve a piece of paper from that plant over there—the snake plant? Oh, would’ve been on Monday... That’s right isn’t it, Captain?”

Rae nodded.

“No, sir,” said Ruby. “I only saw him water the plants, not retrieve a piece of paper, nor did I see a piece of paper residing there or placed there by anyone.”

“Curious, don’t you think, Captain?”

“The first part isn’t—I slipped the message into my pocket while blocking it from Ruby’s view. On how it got there, like I said: these guys are spies. Maybe they—”

Dudek held up his palm.

“Stop. You can leave the investigation to us. For starters, we’ll have your domestic Serviles interrogated.”

Rae said nothing.

Poor Serviles.

“You were acting under the influence of foreign agents who’d altered your neural implant for their purposes. Now it’s working again, the truth will reign.”

Dudek seemed to relax. He trawled through a list of questions—but nothing sensitive relating to Dr Muller and the Alliance’s intelligence service. The reality was he didn’t have much. DASIS and Dr Muller had kept it that way.

Dudek stood, then so did Rae, towering over him. They shook hands, Rae cringing inside at having to make nice with the psychopath.

“You’ve been most helpful. And now your neural implant has been verified by the hospital, we can have confidence in you once more. So, I’m happy to tell you that your good work will be rewarded...”

He paused. A smile grew in Rae’s eyes, hope that Cora would be the reward. Then he could plot a way out of this nightmare.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Tonight, President White grants you an audience. You’ll leave on the 1700 hours flight to Washington DC. Secret Service agents will meet you in DC.”

Rae was speechless. Disappointed. Stunned.

The president?

“What’s it about, sir?”

“Our great leader wishes to meet the famous Captain Rae, the man who brought us ASTRA and destroyed the Space Station Erasmus. I’m not privy to more than that, Captain. It is a great honor, I’m sure you’d agree.”

Rae forced a smile and nodded.

“That is all,” said Dudek. “Good day.”

Dudek marched to the elevator door with the marines and left without another word.

One death is a tragedy; one million is a statistic.

Josef Stalin

It was 1620 hours at Gate A5 at Chicago Central Air Terminal. He sat waiting for his flight to Washington DC, watching the snow fall outside. A dark spot fluttering around near the top of the plate glass window caught his eye. The insect flew towards him but stayed high as he tracked it coming to a hover several meters above him. The time of year and its unnatural flight pattern told him what it was. He got up and thought to turn towards the restroom, assuming the drone bore another message, when something startling happened. A distinct and familiar voice. Dr Muller. He turned around, then checked out the sparsely trafficked gate area.

Where the hell are you, Dr Muller? he wondered.

Sit down, Cal, or you'll draw attention to yourself. SIA has surveillance everywhere, said the voice of Dr Muller.

“Where are you?” he whispered, eyes still scanning. “I can’t see you.”

Cal, this is a direct link to your mindchip—you don't need to speak, just think it and I will hear. The signal is going via the wasp drone... and quite a few others. It may not last—it's a long relay chain, but it's the only way. I can see you too, via the drone's camera. I'm here in El Paso-Juarez. We got word Cora betrayed you and we tried to get you out of the White Sands base...

Brave people—I owe them my life, Rae mind-spoke. They've chipped some of your operatives, Dr Muller.

Yes, we know about Stone and the others. He at least fulfilled the most important part of his mission and re-configured your neural implant to avoid diagnostic detection of the compromise. We've been reverse-engineering and manipulating mindchips for some time. It's a vital battleground if we are to free your people.

Do you know where Cora is? Is she safe?

Safe is a relative word, Cal. But as far as we know she is in Chicago. But that's all we know.

I've been sent to see President White—my flight leaves in half an hour.

Right on cue, came the boarding announcement. He rolled his eyes at the timing.

Yes, we know. Sounds like you don't have long, and it will be hard to speak with you after the Secret Service picks you up in DC. So, I'll get to the point. The president has invited you there, officially to receive a medal for the downing of Erasmus and bringing back the ASTRA AI. However, they want you for a mission. We don't know what exactly, but we do know it has to do with making ASTRA functional as a stepping stone to something referred to as C-Day. We also have reports of human experimentation at the same site as ASTRA is being kept—at a bunker facility in the former state of Colorado.

“This is the last call for boarding...”

Rae stood, forcing a smile at the Servile attending the gate. He needed to buy some time, so walked over to the Servile.

“I left something in the restroom, can you wait while I go it?”

“You have four minutes and thirty seconds,” said the Servile with a toothy grin.

Rae nodded and walked briskly towards the restroom sign.

Look, I need to move, but I have questions, he mind-spoke to Dr Muller.

Go ahead, Cal.

What's the deal?

What do you mean?

I mean, I'm expected to follow your instructions just on trust?

He walked into the restroom and found a stall, which he entered, locking the door.

We're all you have right now, Cal. Even you won't stand a chance alone without outside help. The Regime has everything buttoned down... That's what totalitarian is. And haven't we proven ourselves? Stone and the operatives that went to White Sands were proof enough, surely?

She was right that they'd shown their commitment. But *were* they the good guys? A lingering doubt remained. He paused for a moment, weighing things. In the end, the Alliance was at least *potentially* good, whereas the American Union was demonstrably bad. He was wary of oversimplification, but that's what it boiled down to.

Ok, ok, but if I start working for you are you gonna extract me and Cora?

If we can, yes. No guarantees though.

And relocate us where?

Alliance territory.

He didn't have time to agree where—anywhere in the Democratic Alliance had to be better than this. Maybe back in New Zealand...

And how do I know you won't burn me after I've served your purpose here?

Cal, you're way too valuable to burn. And you'll be granted full amnesty for past crimes. The Supreme Court in The Hague is sympathetic to defectors from your country. They understand the kind of population-control tech the Regime uses. Plus they want to encourage defection, not score a propaganda own-goal.

He knew full-well there were no guarantees. Nothing worth doing was risk-free.

Alright, I buy it. What do you want me to do?

Intel-gathering at this stage. Try to find out as much as you can from President White. This thing is big, Cal—big enough for our military to call full mobilization any day now. In any other circumstance this would be a golden opportunity to terminate the president but there's something more important.

Which is what?

Although it pains me to say it—because ASTRA has taken our best people a decade to create—we need you to destroy ASTRA. We have unconfirmed intel he may send you to the facility where it's located.

Look, I need to go.

He left the restroom and hurried towards the gate with twenty seconds remaining.

We'll be in touch. Remember: if White and his criminals ever get the ASTRA AI working, nothing will stop them. Whoever leads in AI will win the coming war and rule the world. And White will shape the world in his own despicable image. We're counting on you, Cal.

Rae descended the elevator to the White House bunker wearing full dress uniform. The two black-suited Secret Service agents stood behind him in silence. No sign of human likeability breached their icy countenance. Silver goggles—permanently attached to their faces—obscured their eyes and provided heads-up displays as well as x-ray and infrared scanning and facial recognition. Rae also knew they had subdermal armor plates protecting their major organs. These guys were high-end Serviles who lived and breathed duty. It seemed to Rae that Citizens weren't that different from Serviles—just higher on the totem pole and granted superficial rights and freedoms. It was a high-tech dictatorship—something all of history's dictators would've aspired to. A fault in the human condition, an evolutionary outcome: the desire for power over others. After all, that was what money had always been about—a store of other people's future labor; because nothing material ever came without human labor in some way. Even loose rock needed transporting and shaping, trees felling and sawing. What sickened him as much as the slavery and the rights abuses, and the oppression of women, was the white supremacy running through the Regime like a cancerous growth. The racist ideology hadn't been overt before the so-called Renaissance. The waters had been muddy and accusations of racism had been overused for a long time—sometimes correctly, sometimes falsely—to the point their potency had been relegated to political mudslinging. Just like Hitler before him, the aptly-named White was elected in free and fair elections. The opposition candidate at the time was right though: the only way to tyrant-proof the presidency was to not elect a tyrant in the first place. The plea fell on deaf ears and White won. After that came the steady erosion of institutions and norms already under stress from civil strife and Global Depression. The emergence of the monster from the fog of war. Tyrants thrive at times of hardship and strife. In hard times people will go along with terrible things, unthinkable during the good times. Rae hadn't voted in the 2072 election that had swept White to power. It had been the same year he'd join the US Army Rangers. A time of conflict and uprising and almost no home leave. Politics had been the last thing on his mind. Survival—for himself, his people and the United States—had been what he was fighting for. At first. Before everything changed. He wished he paid more attention and not dismissed the risk of tyranny of which the now-liquidated opposition had warned. Hitler had been defeated by the forces of democracy and their enemy's enemy, the Soviet Union. Now the world had three major dictatorships—America, Russia and China—all vying for dominance, and working against the only major democratic force left: the Democratic Alliance. The Alliance's prosperity and resource base was enough to check the other powers' advances. Just. The balance of power was fragile. And the dictatorships were willing to play dirty—White and his cronies, the dirtiest of all. They were capable of anything.

His legs felt momentarily heavy as the elevator decelerated to a stop. The door slid aside. There was a lobby, through which the Secret Service men led Rae directly to an oak paneled office lined with books, fine art and with a huge, centuries-old desk as the focal point. The agents kept watch by the thick double doors behind Rae as he stood in front of the president's desk holding his peaked cap. The flag of the American Union—twelve red and white stripes and a quadrant of dark blue with a single white star—hung limply behind the desk. To his left was a wood-paneled door. He eyed the spines of the hardcover books on the shelf behind the desk. The faded gold lettering on a stained red buckram spine read, *88 Precepts, David Lane*. Beside it, a dark, leather-bound tome read, *Mein Kampf, Adolf Hitler*. Rae knew of this infamous book. Fixed to the spot, facing front, his eyes explored the private office of the president. He noticed how surgically clean the place was and how there was an overpowering smell of antiseptic. The worn leather top of the president's desk looked slick as though it had been sealed with some transparent modern coating. Only three objects sat on desk: a black

buckram-covered hardback, a crystal decanter filled with a clear liquid and a crystal tumbler sealed in vacuum packing. He found it curious that all three items were lined up precisely at a uniform distance a few centimeters from the nearest edge of the desk. The door swung open and in walked President White himself.

Rae stood to attention.

“Freedom Through Struggle! Hail the Renaissance!” recited Rae. No *Hail President White*, when in his presence, as was custom.

The octogenarian with the bald head and white, trimmed beard looked three decades younger than Rae knew him to be. Late-twenty-first-century anti-aging kept time at bay for the tall, thin dictator. He was a legend to the brainwashed, an enduring symbol of tyranny to a man of free thought like Rae. Dressed in his usual all-white suit with red collarless grandfather-style shirt, he regarded Rae. His hawk-like blue eyes seemed to penetrate Rae’s soul through those trade-mark gold, wire-rimmed glasses.

To Rae, the mortal before him seemed less impressive than the ubiquitous, curated images state media pedaled. He stood less tall, looked less distinguished, his jaw of middling strength and his Roman nose familiar, yet somehow diminished.

“At ease, Captain Rae,” said the president, his mid-Atlantic accent gravelly and deep.

The president extended his hand, but no smile overcame the tense, brooding visage. Rae allowed his own meatier palm to be overpowered by the dictator, submitting a respect he didn’t feel. That was when he felt the gossamer-thin glove covering White’s hand. Rae wondered if this was OCD or as a precaution against nerve-agent assassination.

“Take a seat, Captain.”

Rae sat down at the same time as White, who then shifted his gaze to the wood-paneled wall his left—Rae’s right. A rectangle of what had appeared to be oak paneling dissolved to reveal a large, embedded display. The screen flicked from a black background with the AU flag to a live feed of General Hood sitting in what looked to Rae like a conference room. Hood’s dark eyes were averted as if studying something on the desk, his brow furrowed, brushing his trimmed moustache with thumb and fore-finger. President White cleared his throat to get the general’s attention, who looked up with momentary surprise, but snapped straight to the mantra.

“Freedom Through Struggle! Hail the Renaissance!” recited Hood in his Southern drawl.

“Thank you for joining us, general.”

“Of course, sir.”

President White turned to Rae and regarded him for a second.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Captain. Your work is impressive. A true inspiration.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I knew you were the man for the job, Rae,” added General Hood.

The president looked to Hood, nodding, a grin now exposing his perfect, overly-white teeth.

“And as usual, your leadership has proven decisive in getting the right people for the right job. Full credit to you, General.”

Hood nodded, beaming, his smile the first genuine one Rae had seen.

“Your reward will be communicated to you by secure message, General,” said White with a curt nod.

“You’re most generous, sir,” said Hood deferentially.

The president now turned his attention back to Rae.

“I needed to meet you, look you in the eyes,” he said, studying Rae, making him feel like a laboratory specimen. “You are one of my most important operatives. Instructing you personally for this and future missions brings you into my circle of trust.”

“I’m honored, sir,” said Rae, playing along.

He’d heard President White was a superstitious man and that one of his rituals was the need to look into people’s eyes. He’d also heard that White had his own network of operatives to do whatever personal bidding he wished outside of the military and intelligence command structure.

President White opened a desk drawer, took out a case and opened it. A Presidential Citation Medal. A beautifully-crafted item, but not something Rae wanted from a man like White.

“We appreciate what you did on the Erasmus, taking down the enemy station and, more importantly, retrieving ASTRA.”

He snapped the case shut and put it back in the drawer.

“But I believe in efficiency,” continued White. “So, I’ll schedule the award ceremony when you’ve earned your next one. I have a mission for you.”

President White reached for the tumbler on his desk and tore open the vacuum wrapping before pouring what Rae guessed was water from the decanter. The old dictator took a sip as Rae eyed the decanter.

“Stem-cell tonic, Captain,” explained White, taking another sip. “This tonic—along with strict cleanliness—keep age at bay.”

“Mr President, may I ask a question?”

“Please speak freely, Captain.”

“Sir, about my wife, Cora…”

She was never far from his thoughts, but he regretted the words as soon as they’d passed his lips.

White put down his tumbler and raised his palm.

“I’m aware of the consequence imposed on you. The decision can’t be reversed,” he said, his delivery cold and emotionless, a far cry from his on-screen persona. “We have expectations of our Citizens—and none so high as for elite members of our armed forces. Never forget that Citizens enjoy rights only by presidential prerogative. There must be consequences when expectations are not met. Remember that losing your wife to my colleague, Mr Young, is scant punishment for your crimes, Captain. Only through the intervention of General Hood were you spared from becoming Servile.”

White and Hood both looked at him. He knew the script and had to start playing along again.

“Thank you, general,” he said to Hood who acknowledged him with a sharp nod.

“I have strong instincts and I feel you’re the right man for the next mission.”

“Thank you, Mr President,” said Rae.

“You see, making you Servile would be a great waste. It’s a trade-off: with Serviles you get obedience but give up creativity and complex problem solving. For that, we need Citizens. Anyway, no need to fret, Captain, Mr Young is a friend of mine, a good man. He will take care of Cora, so long as you are a loyal servant to the cause.”

Rae quelled his anger, stayed passive, playing the role of faithful soldier.

“Yessir.”

“Good. We *will* be keeping a close eye on you, Captain Rae, because what I am about to tell you can only be entrusted to the most loyal of Citizens.”

Too cynical to trust anyone fully.

President White paused, then said, “Go ahead and tell him, General.”

Hood nodded and said, “ASTRA is of strategic importance. It is an AI of unparalleled power, which is why we went to such great lengths to get it. It is pivotal in our fight against our enemies and the alien parasite they harbor. We don’t have the luxury of time now that Screemers are present on our territory. We have set the date for C-Day. One month from now, on Christmas Day.”

“C-Day, sir?”

Can’t be C for Christmas.

President White spoke.

“C-Day. The Day of Cleansing,” said White grandly. “It will mark the beginning of a new era. This great union of American cities will take back control of our country and beyond. Our Citizens will inherit the Earth from those derelict in their duty to protect it and from those who would do us harm. We make hard choices in order to do good. History will judge us kindly. Continue, please General.”

Rae shuddered.

A war of extermination?

General Hood continued, “Our enemies in the Democratic Alliance, Russia and China are strong. We cannot yet match their resources and military capability. We cannot sustain a war on multiple fronts. Not unless we do things differently. The only way to win such a conflict is with ASTRA. Only with ASTRA can we disrupt their defense networks. And to take down their defenses, we first need to win the cyberwar.”

"And how do we do that?" said Rae.

The old dictator eyed him for a moment, then cleared his throat, his eyes lost somewhere as he began to explain.

“We all know of the received military doctrine that to prosecute a victorious war, the attacker must first win the cyberwar,” said President White.

“It’s the only way to degrade an enemy’s military networks enough to stop mutually-assured destruction,” said General Hood.

White nodded and continued, “The only destruction we want is on enemy territory—and even then, it’s their people we wish to eliminate, not their lands. World War Two ended with the fission bomb, and less than a decade later, both Cold War Superpowers had the hydrogen bomb. Mutually Assured Destruction—the understanding that during a full-scale nuclear exchange both sides would be annihilated. It has kept *overt*, full-scale global conflict in check ever since. ASTRA is a strategic weapon, an artificial intelligence that will win us the cyberwar.”

“That’s right, Mr President,” said Hood. “It will prevent enemy weapons operating at the crucial moment, whether cyber, conventional or nuclear. Our prime objective is to thwart the strategic nuclear response that would otherwise surely come once the enemy is on the ropes and has no other option.”

“So, in this way,” said President White, “for the first time in over a hundred-and-thirty years—the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction no longer applies. ASTRA changes everything. Control ASTRA, win the cyberwar. Win the cyberwar and the enemy will kneel before us.”

“And after we’ve taken down their defenses, sir?” said Rae, addressing the general, trying to remain emotionless.

Hood paused, eyeing him, stroking his moustache, clearly mulling what to say as White looked on suspiciously. White nodded.

“Go ahead, general,” said White.

“You want to know, so I’ll tell you,” said Hood. “You’ll find out soon enough anyway. The nanite cure for the alien parasite Mr President announced during his address last week is real. It really does remove the threat, but somewhat differently to how he explained. We can’t prevent our enemies seeing public media broadcasts, so Mr President was forced to lie to the people in the national interest. The nanites will kill anyone without a functioning mindchip. Self-replicating and with a one-hundred percent fatality rate; only Citizens and Serviles will be spared.”

Rae fought hard to maintain composure as the president observed him then began to laugh. Psychopathy seemed to run amok in the old dictator.

“Smallpox has nothing on our nanites,” White said, his grin not waning. “And when we’ve cleansed mankind of the unworthy, our people will be all that’s left. As I said: it’s the enemy population we wish to eliminate, not their lands. *Their* lands will become *our* lands.”

Rae swallowed in horror but said nothing. The long-feared World War III, a war of extermination. And he wanted Rae to help start it.

Now more animated, White picked up his glass of stem-cell tonic and chugged it down before slamming it down on the desk.

“My mother was killed when I was eight years old,” said White, gritting his teeth, his face flushing. “A pair of immigrants, filthy Illegals, invading our home as my father worked far away, laboring for a pittance, his wages depressed by the foreign workers flooding into the country.”

He paused, awaiting Rae’s reaction but none came.

White continued, “As I grew older, everywhere I found people like *us*, I saw good; yet everywhere I saw those we now dominate, I saw strife. It has been my life’s missions to dissolve the Fifth Column of Illegals that infiltrated the United States and to make permanent the measures to protect us. To protect us from *them*, those who would pollute our blood, those who seek to replace us! It is my duty as leader, Captain!”

Rae swallowed hard, his heart thumping, his mind seething. Every part of him wanted to scream back the passionate rebuke he’d constructed in his mind. But he couldn’t.

Stay calm, he told himself. *Don’t give them a reason to suspect. Keep pushing for actionable intel.*

“And only a benevolent leader with full information can do his people justice.”

President White caught his breath and observed Rae, waiting for a reaction.

Rae nodded, hoping it enough to placate White and end his toxic diatribe.

“Can I ask a question, sir?” he said, turning to General Hood on the display.

“Go ahead,” said Hood.

“What are the delivery vectors for the nanites, sir?”

“There are several delivery methods,” said Hood. “Primarily, ballistic and cruise missiles in the first wave, followed up by Servile delivery—infiltrators and cross-border invasions. The build-up will soon be complete.”

“If it’s self-replicating, why not just release it in the MOZ and let it multiply around the world like a virus?” said Rae.

“You’d think so wouldn’t you,” said Hood, smirking. “But these are nanoscale machines and we’ve not yet perfected fully self-sustained transmission. Some of them die with their hosts, some don’t replicate with perfect fidelity. So, the upshot is we need to replenish the little critters in circulation. And beyond that, our engineers have designed them with limited persistence.”

President White said, “This allows us to spare some enemy populations for Servile conversion. After all, our Servile breeding program cannot supply the global labor force we’ll need.”

The Dictator’s perfect weapon in the hands of a monster.

“Is there a cure or a way the enemy can stop the nanites?” said Rae, looking to White then Hood.

“We believe not,” said Hood. “We lead the world in mass-produced neural implant technology—our enemies are playing catch-up but are nowhere near rolling out counter-measures across whole populations.”

“What about biohazard suits?”

White held up his hand, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. Rae’s heart thudded hard in his chest.

“You have a lot of questions, Captain. Best we get to your mission, eh?”

“Of course, sir. What is my mission?” he said flatly, turning to the general.

“ASTRA is currently located here, at the Central Bunker Complex under a granite mountain in the former Colorado,” said Hood, implying that was his current location. “The team has hooked ASTRA up, brought it online but its performance is lacking. Truth is, it’s no better than our own AI systems. On Erasmus, you unhooked it, you brought it back, and we know you spoke to Dr Muller. Come directly to the bunker complex and tell us everything you know.”

President White said, “Don’t fail me, Captain. If you don’t get this working, then I’m afraid you may be re-tasked in an appropriate Servile capacity. *Freedom Through Struggle*. That is all, gentlemen.”

“*Freedom Through Struggle!*” chanted Rae.

“*Freedom Through Struggle!*” said Hood. “See you here soon, Captain Rae.”

The display faded back to a perfect, seamless facsimile of the surrounding oak paneled wall.

Horror and anger at their inhumanity threatened to boil over. He turned his head slight left, then right, clocking the Secret Service agents in his peripheral vision. He could reach across the desk and break the dictator’s neck before they could react. White was the father of the revolution, the keystone that kept the Regime together. But *was* he really a keystone or was he the head of the hydra? Cut off the snake’s head and another will grow back. General Hood would become president, White would be martyred and the whole genocidal plot would happen anyway. Rae *would* get out of the White House alive but only so they could spend a lifetime torturing him in punishment. The Regime’s spite knew no bounds. No, if he was going to sacrifice himself he had to stop the global genocide. Or die trying.

Genocide is not just a murderous madness; it is, more deeply, a politics that promises a utopia beyond politics - one people, one land, one truth, the end of difference. Since genocide is a form of political utopia, it remains an enduring temptation in any multiethnic and multicultural society in crisis.

Michael Ignatieff

The supersonic VTOL jet lifted off from the snow-covered lawn outside the White House, flying through the wintery night to the mountains, to what used to be called Colorado. Had the sky been clear, Rae would've seen the country below as a dark wilderness. Only Kansas City and Denver were anywhere near the flight path. Every other city was in ruins or a hunting ground for Servile soldiers and killer drones. He had been there, serving the Regime, hunting high-value targets, training Regime units. Still, half a decade after Citizens were confined to Sanctuary Cities, millions of so-called Illegals subsisted in the Badlands. To White, Illegals were like cockroaches to be eradicated. They'd been trying since the Sanctuaries Act 2077, which codified the division of the country into zones and suspended human rights. That had come after the Renaissance in 2074. The USA became the American Union, the US Constitution replaced with the Renaissance Constitution. Amongst other travesties, it meant abolishing the presidential term limit, presidential veto on political candidates, the right of the president to restrict the franchise and an oath of allegiance to the revolution. Stooges from the Nation First Party were installed in all key positions. Supreme Court judges mysteriously died one after the other to be replaced by shills. Emergency powers were freely misused. All these new, key people were white, such was the racist ideology Nation First pedaled. The military, intelligence and law enforcement went the same way. President White and his party had engineered a dictatorship.

Less than an hour later, the flood-lit entrance at foot of the mountain appeared through low cloud as Rae descended in the VTOL jet. An outer security gate of high steel fencing, razor wire and guard towers spanned the road entering the tunnel. Either side, a narrowing wedge hewn from granite led to a tunnel wide enough for a tank. Blast doors sealed the tunnel entrance; a pair of armored fighting vehicles kept watch either side. He felt the bump of touchdown and minutes later, a young Airman with Space Command insignia escorted him to security in an electric bubble cart. 'Travis,' read his nametape, but Travis had clearly been ordered to say as little as possible and spent the short trip from plane to security gate with eyes fixed on the sub-machine gun resting in his lap. They reached the outer gate.

"Step out please, sir," said Travis. "Walk through the scanner over there."

Rae stepped inside the full-body scanner. The doors closed and a vortex of air swirled gently around him. An AI voice guided him through the retinal scanner, fingerprint and vein-pattern scanner, along with a connection to his mindchip. The chemical trace elements test found cordite but exempted him as a member of the armed forces. An x-ray and EHF body scan checked for weapons, explosive devices and the like.

A military drone hovered overhead as he left the scanner and rejoined Airman Travis, passing through the two security gates in the buggy towards the opening blast doors. The wind blew, kicking up powdery snow, a minor blizzard swirling around in the frigid mountain air. They entered the tunnel, its floor painted gray, bare concrete walls and exposed piping and electrical trays running over head beside bright LED lighting. The fifteen-meter-wide passage ran half a football field to its end where another armored fighting vehicle stood sentry. Soldiers and airmen walked purposefully along, into and out of side entrances.

“Where are we going?” said Rae.

“I’ve been instructed to take you to Major Dudek.”

Dudek? What the hell? What’s he doing here?

Rae had hoped he’d seen the last of him in Chicago. He’d seemed satisfied with his story about how the Alliance had contacted him and that his mindchip had passed diagnostics. This could only spell trouble.

What does he want now?

He knew there was no point asking a low-level grunt like Travis.

They took a left down a branch half-way down the main tunnel and stopped outside a set of double doors. Travis led him through a maze of corridors, past closed doors, conference rooms, offices and then several doors labelled as laboratories. To Rae’s surprise, Travis ignored the one marked *AI Lab*, instead leading him to the *Cybernetics Lab*. They entered the bright, clean, predominantly white space of lab benches, computer equipment and machines, none of which Rae recognized. On the left, they passed a glass-walled bio-containment-type lab with hazard-suited researchers and bio-containment cabinets. There was some kind of decontamination ante-room behind the entrance. The placard to the suite read, *Nanite Research*.

At the end of the Cybernetics Lab was a door marked, *Examination Room 1*. The door opened and out stepped the small, bespectacled Dudek. An arrogant smirk from the murdering spook, greeted Rae. Dudek held out his arms like he was welcoming an old friend.

“Ah, wonderful to see you again so soon, Captain!”

Rae followed protocol, standing to attention then chanted the mantra of the brainwashed: “Hail President White! Hail the Renaissance! Freedom Through Struggle!”

Don’t give the prick a reason...

Travis did the same. Dudek repeated the mantra, smiling, eyeing Rae, ignoring Travis.

“I really felt like we hit it off last time,” said Dudek. “Tell me, how did it feel meeting our great leader?”

“Sir, it was a great honor to meet Mr President,” said Rae emotionlessly.

“Off you go, Airman Travis,” said Dudek dismissively, not looking at him.

Travis turned and marched off, leaving Rae alone with the psychopath outside the small examination room.

“Come in,” said Dudek, leading him into the room, which reminded Rae of a doctor’s office with its desk and bed and a range of scanning devices. A middle-aged woman, dark hair in a bun and soulless, dead eyes sat behind the desk, manipulating the small panel attached by cable to a brushed steel skull cap.

“That is a high-fidelity neural implant interface,” said Dudek.

“Why is it required, sir?” said Rae. “I was instructed by the president to assist with ASTRA.”

“And indeed, you will be. But let’s just say I don’t take things at face value, Captain. I’m a very cautious man—it’s how you stay alive in my business. I’m sure you know that though.”

“Yessir.”

What’s this scan going to reveal?

The doctor got up holding the skull-cap device as Rae eyed the sidearm in Dudek’s holster. A non-networked .45cal semi-auto—standard issue for officers and intelligence staff. Network-connected weapons were too vulnerable to hacking and tracking for guys like this. The trade-off was they couldn’t be shut off

remotely. He visualized what he'd like to do to the bastard—how he'd snap his neck without remorse. He'd spare the doctor if he could. But then what? Even if he managed to escape, they'd still have ASTRA.

"I said, please sit on the bed," said the doctor insistently, rousing him from his daydream.

"Oh sorry, ma'am," said Rae as Dudek watched him suspiciously.

Rae sat on the bed and the doctor drew the curtain around him.

"The skull cap will allow complete download of all audio-visual data you have experienced," said the doctor.

Shit! What did I say to Dr Muller via the wasp drone relay? Can they read mind-speak too? The doc said audio-visual—thoughts aren't recorded by the chip, right? A sense of growing dread came over him.

"Last twenty-four hours only," said Dudek. "Otherwise we'll be here all night."

She strapped the cold metal cap onto his recently-shaven head, pressed something on the control panel, then sat back down and waited, staring at the wall. Perhaps she was having a mind-conversation and looking at something on a build-in retinal display.

Dudek drew back the curtain around the bed and leant on the wall opposite Rae. A taunting smile grew over the bastard's face.

"You know the trouble with you, Captain?"

"No, sir."

It pained him to use *sir*.

"You love someone. You love your beautiful wife. Big mistake, big weakness in our game, Captain."

"Really, sir?"

"Yes, it's leverage. I've always been opposed to our intel staff and Special Forces having loved ones. But softer men have so far prevailed. It's a privilege afforded to all Citizens, apparently."

"Yessir."

"But I suppose every cloud has a silver lining. That leverage isn't just for the enemy to use. Take you for example. Cora has been key to reining you in. And, if your behavior is found wanting in anyway, there's plenty more we can do with said leverage. Hell, we sometimes go after overseas family members."

Don't you dare...

"How are you parents by the way? New Zealand isn't it, Captain?"

Bastard.

"I don't know, sir," he said, truthfully. He'd not spoken to them in years. Thoughts of them had only resurfaced after the Erasmus mission. Since then, only the whirlwind of events had distracted him from the longing to contact his mother and father. The mindchip had a way of diluting emotional connections which hadn't been mapped by its social network algorithms. Yet another method of control. The more he thought about it, the more the technology frightened him.

Totalitarian.

His parents had done the smart thing and quit the country after the Renaissance. In retrospect, he wished he'd done the same and spared himself from this nightmare.

"Yes, out of sight out of mindchip," said Dudek, chuckling.

"We have the results," said the doctor. "Would you like to review them, sir?"

"Yes," said Dudek. "Direct transfer."

Rae watched as he became still, standing bolt upright, eyes glazed, focusing on some distant point.

Regarding the vile little man, he'd seen this weird behavior many times before—it was mind's-eye-and-ear playback, a high-speed review of the last twenty-four hours of Rae's life.

Time dragged as the two mind-zombies worked in their internal worlds. Even at high-speed, Dudek's mind would need to assimilate what he saw and heard. Rae would just need to wait in hope that the bastard didn't find anything incriminating. The doctor was similarly staring into the ether, every so often her lips silently aping speech.

Cal, this is Stephanie Muller, said the voice in his head.

Where are you? ... I mean, where's the wasp-drone? Rae replied in his mind.

We've managed to infiltrate the HVAC system.

Major William Dudek is—

Yes, we've been listening in. Sit tight. Don't react.

I won't—not yet.

What happened when you met Dictator White?

He's convinced my mindchip's working, so he was open.

Go ahead, Cal. Tell me what you learned.

Here's the plan. It's bad, very bad...

He outlined what White had said: about using ASTRA to nullify enemy defenses; about the full-scale nanite attack and how it spares only chipped Citizens and Serviles—C-Day, the Day of Cleansing; on the operational snippets he'd managed to glean. He concluded with what President White had said.

“Control ASTRA, win the cyberwar. Win the cyberwar and the enemy will kneel before us.”

There was a pause before Dr Muller replied. When she did, her voice betrayed an uneasy nervousness.

This... This has already been helpful. We thank you. Did he divulge anything else?

No, I couldn't probe too much without arousing suspicion.

I understand. You did very well.

Now they've sent me here expecting me to solve their problems with ASTRA. I'm not an expert. And I've had to act as if my mindchip's working, but Dudek's all over me. He smells a rat.

Just sit tight. We have faith in you, Cal. And there's a friendly there—

Who? Where?

Our other source in the bunker went dark thirty-six hours ago. We believe she's been caught. Now we've lost track of ASTRA. We can't get the wasp-drone into anywhere with a filtered-air system. Unfortunately, that means most of the labs. So, in a few seconds the wasp-drone sitting in the vent above your head is going to come to you. Open your mouth and let it fly in. Don't worry, it will still work so long as you don't crush it.

Acknowledged, he mind-spoke, before opening his mouth.

The wasp buzzed quietly from the vent, flying straight into his mouth. Dudek and the doctor remained locked in their mind's eye. The tiny drone landed on his tongue and the vibration of the wings ceased. He tucked it at the side of his lower gum. Uncomfortable, but concealed. He wondered how visible the lump would be and whether the vigilant Dudek would notice.

Can you still hear me, Cal?

Loud and clear.

Your secondary objective is to locate our other asset.

Dr Muller's voice trailed off. There was a pause.

There's... something I need to tell you about our other asset—the one that we've lost contact with.

She's—

“Wakey, wakey, Captain!” said Dudek, clicking his fingers in front of Rae's face.

He straightened up, cleared his throat.

“Yessir. Just... daydreaming.”

“Hmm... Well, I've reviewed the download and have a few... queries.”

Dudek paused, his probing eyes meeting Rae's.

“You were at the air terminal in Chicago earlier today.”

“Yessir.”

“At around 1620 hours you were waiting at the departure gate.”

Rae nodded.

“At 1622 hours you said, and I quote, *Where are you?* followed by, *I can't see you.*”

Rae felt his muscles tense, his pulse quickened as the interrogator let it sink in.

He said nothing.

“And Captain, the visual recording shows that your eyes were searching—first around you, then above you. Strange, wouldn't you agree?”

“I thought I heard someone call my name, but I must've been mistaken.”

“Really?” he said with a wry smile.

“Yessir.”

“You know, it's a shame we can't yet record thoughts too, except in very rudimentary ways. Maybe this final frontier will be reached with the next generation of implants. You will be high on the list for one of those, Captain. Imagine—no disloyalty, all Citizens working in unison.”

All free thought extinguished.

“Anything else, sir?”

Dudek seemed to mull things over.

“No, but I've sent the audio-visual file to HQ for further analysis,” he said. “We believe you can help the team in getting ASTRA up and running. We know you spoke with Dr Muller before she escaped, and you may have seen something about how the sphere was set up. Unfortunately, your neutral implant was corrupted on Erasmus, so recorded data was not available. I suppose we'll need to rely on your organic memories.”

“I believe I can help, sir,” said Rae.

Got to get close to ASTRA.

“Good, I knew you could. You know, General Hood was initially opposed to you coming here—said you're just a hired gun. *What would he know about ASTRA?* he told me. But I believe you *can* help.”

He smiled and patted Rae on the shoulder all buddy-buddy.

“Thank you, sir,” he said.

“Come on, I have something to show you before we take a look at ASTRA.”

Dudek led the way out of the examination room and down the corridor. They stopped outside the glass-fronted *Nanite Research* lab.

The frosted glass door slid aside. To the side of the ante-room was a door marked, *Nanite Security*.

“Decontamination suite,” said Dudek. “We don’t need to worry about the nanites too much because they recognize our neural implants. Now it will only kill those without mindchips. In other words, non-Citizens and non-Serviles. However, we’ll still wear biohazard suits and decontaminate when we leave—we still need to prevent release into the environment until C-Day. Follow me.”

Rae followed Dudek in. To Rae, it looked a lot like a locker room with white biohazard suits of various sizes hanging on the wall. To the left were three cubicles, each marked, *Decontamination Booth*. He hung up his jacket and left his peaked cap in one of the lockers before donning the biohazard suit. The moment he sealed the suit, he felt the flow of air from its filtering system.

Rae heard the voice of the small, white-suited Dudek through the suit’s built-in comms link.

“Follow me,” said Dudek, leading him to a translucent glass door, which is when Rae noticed the dark object not fully concealed in Dudek’s bio-suit pocket. It was the grip of his handgun.

This is a comms check, came the voice of Dr Muller in his mind.

I hear you loud and clear, he mind-spoke in response, no longer troubled by the tiny metallic wasp drone hidden beside his gum.

Updates?

Dudek’s leading me into the nanite research lab. He’s taken his handgun. He still doesn’t trust me.

Acknowledged.

I don’t know why he’s bringing me here when it’s ASTRA they want me for.

We don’t know either, but we need to get all the intel we can. Open your mouth and let out the wasp.

He realized the wasp drone would be hard to spot inside the dark of the bio-suit hood. Using his tongue to work the wasp free, he felt and heard the buzz of its wings as it dried itself ready for flight. It hovered from his mouth across the few inches to the hood, landing just below the visor.

Confirming visual feed, said Dr Muller to his mind.

Rae kept quiet as the door slid open and revealed the brightly-lit lab with its central bank of stainless-steel benches, containment cabinets and bio-suited researchers working at displays and microscopes and with lab equipment. On either side of the ten-meter wide, thirty-meter long central lab area were five glass-walled enclosures—ten in total. Only the two closest on the left had fully transparent glass—frosted, translucent glass walls and doors obscured the other eight cells. The three-by-three-meter transparent cell on his left contained at least a dozen dogs of different sizes and breeds. Most of them slouched around bored or sleeping, but they were all healthy as far as he could tell. Two of the smaller ones fought playfully. Another ate food from a bowl. There were an assortment of dog toys and a couple of balls for them to play with.

“Don’t worry—we’ve proved the nanite only works on humans,” said Dudek.

Don’t worry? Unbelievable!

“Are you a dog lover like me, Captain Rae?”

Not the first psychopath to prefer dogs over humans, recalled Rae.

“Yessir.”

The next glass cell held a pair of chimpanzees.

“We’ve tested on a range of mammals and non-mammal species,” explained Dudek. “We have a great affinity for nature. C-Day will be the best thing that ever happened to wildlife once all the unworthy humans are removed.”

The wall and door of the third cell was translucent.

“This is what happens to the unworthy,” said Dudek.

He reached for the control panel beside the door and tapped the small touchscreen, clearing the frosted glass.

Rae’s jaw dropped as Dudek turned, observing his reaction. A devilish grin grew on Dudek’s face as Rae forced himself to look. A dead man—tall, dark, athletic-physique—lay naked and shackled, slumped against the painted cinder-block wall. Half his face had been stripped to the bone, as had his lower left leg and part of his hand. A gray veneer covered the bone and the exposed edges of raw flesh and skin. Rae heard Dr Muller gasp on the comms channel. His stomach lurched, but he stayed outwardly calm.

My God, that’s horrific, she said to his mind.

“An amazing achievement,” said Dudek, now eyeing the dead man. “The nanite is multiplying, using the subject’s molecules to reproduce.”

Rae said nothing, averted his eyes. Dudek observed him.

“You find it distasteful, Captain?”

Distasteful’s an understatement.

“Yessir,” he said before he could correct himself.

“Your chip’s probably being a little slow in quelling your empathy,” said Dudek. “Empathy’s always retained though—it’s a useful emotion. Take me for instance. I’m a very empathetic man.”

Rae almost scoffed but held his tongue.

“You see, Captain, only the empathetic can understand the emotions of others. If I couldn’t do that I wouldn’t be very effective, now would I?”

“No, I guess not... sir.”

Dudek regarded Rae for a moment, then gave a brief smile, betraying something between amusement and concern.

“Come along, Captain—there’s more fascinating things to see. Let’s take a look at *Cell #4*.”

With a sense of dread, he followed Dudek to the translucent glass frontage of the next cell. The intel officer tapped the panel and the white frosting went clear. A twentysomething man—underweight, East-Asian-looking—sat unclothed on atop the cinder-block plinth-like bed. Shackles joined his wrists and ankles. Bruises and recently-scabbed wounds told of a beating during his captivity. The poor guy was probably one of many plucked from the Badlands to be used and abused by the despicable Regime. He looked up, tired and hopeless, fear in his eyes.

“This subject is an Illegal from the Northwest MOZ,” said Dudek breezily.

“What *is* this place?” cried the young man. “What am I doing here?”

Dudek smiled.

“Now, now, just be calm,” he said. “You’re doing a very important job. You’re about to be a *star*—look, our cells have cameras recording everything.”

Rae clenched his fists, his jaw tensed, his face flushing with anger.

Don't react, Cal, said Dr Muller, distress permeating her voice. *You may want to kill the bastard, but you're no good to us dead and there'll be billions of dead if we don't stop them deploying their nanites. And for that we can't allow ASTRA to take down our defenses.*

I know. I'm on top of it, he replied.

"Stand up," said Dudek, drawing his handgun, holding it down by his side.

The man complied as Dudek turned to the bio-suited figure sat at the lab bench behind.

"You," said Dudek, and the suit turned around—a middle-aged woman, her eyes blank, detached. A researcher.

"Yessir, how may I help?"

"The test subject is ready. Go ahead and insert the agent."

"Certainly, sir."

She opened a stainless-steel cabinet containing glass canisters the size of a soda can and slid one out. Rae saw it was half-full of gray powder, like iron filings. She got up and removed the cap to reveal a valve in the lid. Next, she went over to the cell door and opened a small hatch, not much bigger than the canister, and installed it onto a nozzle, before closing the cover.

"What the hell *is* that stuff?" cried the young man in the cell.

"It's your destiny," said Dudek with relish, nodding to the researcher.

Rae looked on as she tapped the control panel. A whirring noise came from the canister compartment, followed by the sound of a fan and the flow of air.

Rae followed Dudek's gaze to the cell's ceiling where a vent spewed a fine dusting of nanites. The poor test subject looked up, eyes wide. His pleading eyes caught Rae's and he shuffled desperately to the door.

"Help me!"

Rae glanced at the pistol in Dudek's hand, fighting the urge to act.

The young man began coughing uncontrollably and sat down against the wall before blinking rapidly, then rubbing his eyes. He moaned in distress as his restrained hands alternated between his ears, eyes and skin, which he scratched frantically. The moaning gave way to spitting as he tried to clear the killer nanites from his mouth.

"This could go on for a while," said Dudek, unconcerned. "I must confess, Captain, this little show is all for you."

Rae said nothing, just stared numbly at the murdering bastard before him.

"Change out *Cell #4's* air," said Dudek to the researcher.

The fan changed pitch and the remaining mist of gray cleared from the cell while the nanites already on and in the test subject continued their destruction.

"Cell air cleansed, sir."

"Very good," said Dudek. "Open the door. Close it once we're both inside."

"Yessir," said the woman.

The door slid open. Dudek entered, gun drawn and moved past the frenzied, naked form before grabbing him by the hair and dragging him to the far corner beside the bed. The man was too preoccupied and weakened to resist. Dudek beckoned Rae towards him as the door whooshed shut.

"It's a slow, painful death, Captain."

“Yessir,” Rae said, forcing a calm tone.

“Take off your bio-hazard suit.”

His stomach dropped.

This must be a test. A test of compliance. A test of loyalty.

He reached for the fastening on the hood. The wasp drone hopped to his shirt and moved below his field of vision towards his shirt collar. He removed the hood, then the suit, stepping out and kicking it across the room while Dudek nodded approvingly.

“Very good, Captain,” said Dudek. “I’ll keep mine on I think. No need to dirty my uniform too.”

Dudek held out the handgun, grip-first, eyes locked on him.

“Take it.”

He took the gun.

“Now kill the subject.”

Poor guy was dead the moment they exposed him, rationalized Rae with sadness.

The dying man looked up in horror. Rae raised the gun, stared unseeing, then squeezed the trigger. The muzzle flashed, the crack of the pistol rang out. A red entry hole appeared in the man’s forehead and he slumped sideways to the ground. Rae lowered the gun and turned to Dudek, resisting the powerful urge to shoot him.

Stay the course, Cal, came the voice of Dr Muller, now steeled, resolute.

“Excellent, Captain... Maybe I was wrong about you. Perhaps we *can* trust you,” said Dudek. “You know, it’s never wise to act on just one source. Intelligence work demands corroborating evidence, verification. The diagnostics on your neural chip were reassurance. For many, that was enough, but not for me. I prefer the old-fashioned way.”

“Yessir,” he said, neutrally. “Can we go to ASTRA now? I may know something that helps the team get—”

“That’s what I like to hear—keen to get started!”

Rae gave a curt nod.

“But there’s one more thing,” said Dudek. “Do this *one* thing to prove your loyalty beyond doubt.”

“Yessir.”

“Come.”

Dudek led him out of the cell, stepping over the expanding pool of blood.

“Get this place cleaned up,” he ordered a nearby lab tech, as he strode to *Cell #5*, next door.

Dudek tapped the control panel, and the glass wall turned transparent. Rae was surprised the cell was empty—he was expecting to see another helpless victim.

Is this cell for me? he thought.

He’d already been exposed to the nanite dust in the air of *Cell #4*—surely his mindchip was working well enough to nullify them.

The door slid open.

Dudek smirked at him but said nothing. His eyes glazed momentarily, focusing on something in the virtual realm.

Hang in there, Cal. Remember: they need you, said Dr Muller’s voice.

He eyed the gun in Dudek’s hand.

Dudek's eyes returned to Rae.

"They're late," Dudek said. "Shouldn't be long."

"Who are we waiting for, sir?"

"You'll see."

The researcher woman walked over to Rae and handed him a glass canister of nanites. He peered at the gray dust, wondering what the terrible nano-machines actually looked like. The fine dust could spread easily and get anywhere.

Do we know how to stop these things, other than the entire population wearing bio-suits forever? he asked Dr Muller in his mind.

Counter-measures was something our other source was seeking. Now she's gone dark, said Dr Muller's voice, worry lacing her words.

I'll try to find her.

Tread carefully, Cal. You're our last best hope of stopping this thing.

Muffled, raised voices from the direction of the lab entrance grew louder—a woman, in some distress, screaming, protesting. The deep, aggressive voice of a man telling her to shut up. Then from the decontamination room a *thwack* and a shriek from the woman. The door slid aside. Escorted between the two big bio-suited soldiers was a late-twenties woman, with intelligent sapphire eyes and a noble, heart-shaped face and shoulder-length light hair, completely naked. Her lips were swollen and bloody, there was a red mark on her cheek, and her arms and legs were bruised. She limped slowly, then when refusing to move got shoved by the brute on the right.

Are you getting this? Rae mind-spoke to Dr Muller.

There was a pause. He could hear labored breathing from Dr Muller.

Are you ok?

He heard a male voice in the background through the neural audio feed. Dr Muller, shooing him away, composing herself.

No, I'm not ok, but I will continue. That's our other asset, Cal.

Dudek snapped out of his mind's eye.

"Ah, there's our lovely young spy!" he said, reveling in the situation.

Rae gritted his teeth, his death stare focused on the two bastards escorting her. The blonde woman's staunchness never faulted. Rae's eyes met hers. He'd never seen her before, but she looked somehow familiar.

"Put her in the cell," said Dudek to the soldiers.

She glowered at Dudek as they forced her into *Cell #5*, pushing her to the floor, the door closing behind them.

"Peters, you're dismissed," said Dudek. "Davis, you stay."

The soldier named Peters left the lab, the other one took up position nearby, holding his slung SMG across his chest.

The blonde captive stood in the cell, defiant. Rae admired her apparent resolve: vulnerable, naked, beaten and probably tortured but still standing, her face full of smoldering fury. Only training or the right mindchip could provide such strength. Or maybe she'd caved and sung like a bird and had escaped lightly. Somehow, he doubted that.

“Captain Rae,” said Dudek announced grandly, “I would like you to meet Jennifer Scott, real name Sabine Muller, daughter of Dr Stephanie Muller.”

There is no friendship, no love, like that of the parent for the child.

Henry Ward Beecher

Rae fought hard to remain impassive.

Now you know. Our other asset is my daughter, said the diminished voice of Dr Muller.

He said nothing.

“Dr Muller’s an old friend of yours, isn’t she?”

“Not a friend. A former professor.”

“You spoke to her on the Erasmus, did you not?”

“Yes,” he replied numbly.

“Did you know that this little spy’s mother was part of DASIS?”

“No.”

“They recruited her during her tenure at UCLA. Over time, the asset became a handler. Looks like it’s a family tradition.”

Rae said nothing.

“Are you sure you didn’t know, Captain?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Dudek broke his stare and continued. “Now we have her darling daughter, it seems we have the good doctor’s undivided attention,” said Dudek. “Let’s switch on the display over there.”

A two-meter-wide image appeared on the previously plain white wall, above the rear exit doors. The strained face of Dr Muller appeared on the screen.

“Ah, so wonderful you could join us, Dr Muller,” said Dudek. “We didn’t know if you’d make yourself available, but I suppose news of your daughter’s captivity did the trick. I must say, it was naïve to think you could hide the fact she’s your daughter. Amazing what stray DNA can reveal—we extracted it from your hand print on ASTRA. Fortuitous that her mother has detailed technical knowledge of ASTRA.”

He nodded to soldier Davis, who pointed his sub-machine gun at Rae.

“Just insurance, Captain Rae,” said Dudek, grinning. “I hope you understand.”

“What do you *want*?” said Dr Muller.

“I assume you are on a private line, away from prying eyes and ears.”

“Yes, I’m on a private, secure channel. Alone.”

Rae didn’t know how Dr Muller usually communicated via the wasp drone or if she still could.

Dr Muller, blink twice if you can still hear me and can’t speak.

She blinked twice in quick succession.

Acknowledged—you can hear my mind-speak.

“You know what we want, Doctor,” said Dudek. “We want you to get ASTRA working for us. In return, your daughter will live, and we will provide safe passage to wherever you and she wish to go.”

“Live how? As a mind-slave like you?”

“For us Citizens, it isn’t so bad,” said Dudek, his face flushing in annoyance. “You people have no idea, do you? It isn’t as though we’re devoid of our own thoughts. The neural implant and its algorithms simply seed

imperatives in our subconscious—it helps us do a job better, furthers the nation’s aims. *We*—unlike you—are all pulling in the same direction. That’s why we’re successful. But we’re not here for a philosophical debate, Doctor. Suffice to say, you will be given the choice. Maybe you’d like to stay once you see our way of life.”

Just go along with it to buy some time, said Rae to Dr Muller via thought. *Please trust me.*

“Alright... I will help you,” said Dr Muller flatly.

“Very good! But there is one thing we must do first...”

He looked at the canister in Rae’s hand and nodded towards the small insertion door. Rae paused.

“Go ahead, Captain. Don’t delay.”

“Is that what I *think* it is?” said Dr Muller.

“Yes, it’s nanites,” crowed Dudek.

Rae opened the small hatch, removed the canister lid and slotted the valve over the nozzle, then reclosed the hatch and stepped back.

He looked on in horror as Dudek started up the fan sending nanite dust into the cell. He eyed the gun-toting soldier, then switched his gaze to Dudek’s handgun. His muscles tensed, ready to spring. He could lunge for the pistol, knocking him aside, take out—

“Mom!” called out Sabine. “Sie haben den Timer meines Gehirn-Mikrochips eingeschaltet!”

Rae held off, wishing his mindchip was active to translate what he thought she’d said.

“Yes, of course. We aren’t going to kill Sabine quite yet,” said Dudek. “She’s our leverage. Her neural implant will protect her from the nanites for as long as it’s functioning. But... you have an hour to become helpful, Dr Muller. Then we’ll extend it another hour and so on until ASTRA is working. And I’m pleased to see Captain Rae has complied. He can help us take the war to the enemy soon, now we have you on board, Dr Muller. However, in the meantime he can tell me if you’re lying.”

He turned to Rae.

“Captain, if you hear any inconsistencies from what you gleaned on Erasmus...”

Rae nodded.

Facing Dr Muller on the display, Dudek continued, “Any lies, any hint that you’re not working alone and... well, you’ve seen what our nanites do to the human body.”

It’s a test, Dr Muller... Rae said via his thoughts.

“Yes, I’m alone, and no, I don’t know what your nanites do to the human body,” said Dr Muller gravely. “Nothing good if you’re involved.”

“Now, now, Dr Muller,” said Dudek. “No need to be like that... Let me describe it to you so you know what awaits your daughter should you fail to play nicely.”

He described the horror Rae had just witnessed in Cell #4—the nanites attacking the poor, undernourished Asian man. Rae smoldered inside as Dudek seemed to relish the retelling. Dr Muller listened silently. Maybe she already knew, maybe she didn’t. The main thing was she gave no hint of the wasp drone—a capability the enemy were clearly unaware of.

“I’m sure your daughter is well aware of this and will confirm the accuracy of my description,” said Dudek.

Sabine nodded.

“Bastard,” she muttered.

Rae saw Dudek's thin-skinned annoyance beneath the flimsy mask of a forced smile. He guessed he wasn't used to dissent; fear was what Dudek had probably come to expect from his victims.

"Good," he continued cheerily. "Now we've established the ground rules, I need you to cross into our Southern Border Zone, Dr Muller. Yes, we know you're in El Paso-Juarez, den of vipers that it is."

"What? Why?" Dr Muller said, caught off-guard.

"Because you're going to space, Doctor," said Dudek, smiling. "We now know that ASTRA only works in micro-gravity—that's why you built it on the Erasmus. It's the time-dilation sphere isn't it? ASTRA is already in the payload capsule ready to go."

Dr Muller said nothing.

"Well then, better get yourself to the border crossing at El Paso-Juarez, Dr Muller. Our people will be expecting you," he said.

"How do I know you'll do what you say?" she said.

"Do you mean do what I say if you *don't* come? Or do what I say if you *do* come?"

Rae gritted his teeth at his arrogant smirk, at how he was toying with her.

"Don't come, Mom," screamed Sabine. "These bastards want to kill us all!"

Just say yes, said Rae. Please... I have a plan.

Dr Muller nodded, a shroud of dejection over her face.

"I will come."

"Excellent! We'll have a jet ready for you at the border station. And remember—we'll be watching. One false move and we'll let Sabine's mindchip timer run down. If that happens, the nanites will eat her alive."

Stay in contact, mind-spoke Rae to Dr Muller.

The video-con to Dr Muller disappeared from the wall display to be replaced by a digital timer.

54:17... 54:16... 54:15

"Let's hope Mommy's more cooperative than this little bitch," said Dudek, sneering at Sabine.

She gave Dudek the finger and mouthed, *Fuck you.*

Rae watched him redden, a twitch of frustration crossing his face.

"Captain Rae," he said, his teeth clenched.

"Yessir."

"Shoot her kneecaps."

Rae hesitated.

Dudek held-out his handgun, grip-first.

"Well, Captain. What are you waiting for?"

"But... But we need her."

"I promised she will live," said Dudek. "I didn't promise she could walk... Go on then."

Rae took the gun from Dudek, clicked off the safety and chambered a round. The cell door slid open. He saw Soldier Davis track him with the SMG, stepping to the side to keep Rae in his line of fire as he entered the cell.

Sabine backed off towards the corner, her head shaking, palms out saying *Stop!* Rae raised the gun. Time seemed to stand still. Then it happened. In one fluid move, he spun one-eighty, dropping to his knee and fired at the soldier who let off a burst of automatic fire. Rae felt the hammer blow of the round slamming into

his chest, knocking him off balance, its progress halted by his sub-dermal endo-armor. Pain swept over his senses like a tsunami as he gritted his teeth and struggled to regain balance. He rolled to the side, behind the glass wall. Bullets were embedded in the ballistics glass, forming spiders' web cracks but the incoming fire had ceased. Blood trickled from Rae's head and into his eye. He wiped it away and felt the groove of missing scalp carved by another of Davis's bullet that had glanced off his head. He looked up to see the soldier slumped motionless on the floor outside. The endo-armor layer below his scalp was scraped, a shallow groove cut into the alloy by supersonic lead. No time to check his bleeding chest. He was conscious and breathing and that was good enough. He got up to see Dudek exiting via the rear doors. Rae ducked out of the cell, taking aim. Dudek slipped sideways through the sliding doors at the same time as Rae squeezed the trigger. The first round missed his back but the second struck his calf. There was a high-pitch shriek, followed by the sound of him clattering to the deck. Lab workers scattered towards the front exit in the opposite direction. With the rear doors now fully open, Rae strode towards the felled Dudek, who was trying to get up. Rae accelerated towards him and landed a savage boot to the bastard's gut, sending him sprawling. Rae ignored the claret dripping from his wounds and set about tenderizing him like a steak. Seconds later, the psychopath lay sprawled on his back, bloody and broken and barely conscious.

"Shoot me," he croaked.

"You don't deserve a quick death, you murdering bastard," said Rae.

"Shoot me," repeated Dudek.

"Not worth the bullet," he said, before stamping hard on the bastard's face, extinguishing his life.

"Good riddance," muttered Rae as he turned and ran back to Sabine's cell.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind he wondered what Dudek would've been like without the mindchip. It was too late for him now—probably had been long ago. Redemption still held out for Rae and his beloved Cora, and many, many others entangled in the nightmare. But not unless he and Sabine got out of there.

"Thank you," she said, striding with a limp towards the doorway, ignoring her own nudity.

"Let's get you some clothes," he said.

"We need to decontaminate first," she said, no hint of a German accent like her mother. "Come on."

He ran to the fallen Davis and took his SMG as Sabine moved quickly to the decontamination suite. Next, he found a scalpel and ran back to the dead Dudek, crouching beside him and lifting his right hand. He felt the web of skin between his thumb and fore finger. A small lump—an RFID tag. He cut it out and took it with him. When he arrived at the decontamination room, Sabine was already in one of the booths. A hissing sound told him it was doing its work, cleansing her of the deadly nanites. He stripped, put his uniform in the disposal chute and entered a decontamination booth along with the two weapons, carefully clasping onto the RFID tag and the wasp-drone. Water sprayed at him from every direction, turning crimson as it mixed with the blood still trickling from his wounds. It threatened to dislodge the RFID and wasp, but he held on to them tight while still allowing them to be cleaned. He hoped they'd survive the battering. The water stopped, and the mist filling the space was extracted. Next, bright pulses of heat and light forced his eyes closed. A fan kicked in and warm air dried him in ten seconds before the door opened. He saw Sabine, now clothed in researcher-wear: blue pants and a white lab-coat, her damp blonde hair straggly and free, her shoes simple, lace-up flats.

"Swallow this," she said, handing him a red and white capsule.

"What is it?"

“It neutralizes the nanites inside your body. Take it, just in case they deactivate your mindchip and you’re exposed.”

He swallowed the capsule, then found an extra-large researcher’s uniform. But there were no shoes large enough on the rack, so he went barefoot.

“Where’s ASTRA?” he said, pulling on the pants.

“It’s already loaded onto a rocket in one of the silos,” she said quickly.

“Take this,” he said, passing her the handgun.

She tucked the gun into her waistband, then spotted something and ran over to the first-aid kit on the shelf.

“Let me dress your wounds,” she said, eyeing the blood-filled bullet strikes on his chest and head.

“It’s ok, they deflected off my endo-armor.”

“Oh, of course. *Endo-armor*,” she said. “Should’ve guessed.”

He put on the researcher’s tunic, placing the wasp-drone in his chest pocket and Dudek’s RFID chip in his pants pocket.

Dr Muller, do you still read me, he mind-spoke.

No reply.

“The comms relay’s offline,” he said to Sabine. “We need to get word to your mom, tell her to abort her border crossing.”

“We can’t hang around,” said Sabine. “Whether she comes or not, they’re going to launch ASTRA to the SS Zenith soon. They’ll be planning to send Mom up on a later launch.”

“How does ASTRA work? Why’d they need to send it into orbit?” he said while checking the submachine gun.

“The time-dilation sphere only works in micro-gravity—they know this now,” she said. “ASTRA is only part Artificial Intelligence—it uses multiple human brains working in parallel with a powerful quantum computer inside the time-dilation sphere. The sphere accelerates time inside ASTRA. The AU are nowhere close to achieving technology like this. Mom and the Erasmus team had achieved one month per second and sustained it for nearly a minute. Imagine that: twenty-five minds and a quantum computer all communicating frictionlessly. What they could discover in sixty months, or sixty years...”

It boggled Rae’s mind, but there was no time to lose. If they could launch the rocket, ASTRA would be out of reach and the Regime would have the upper hand. Once on board the SS Zenith, the American Union’s space superiority would keep it there, out of reach.

There are hunters, and there are victims. By your discipline, cunning, obedience, and alertness, you will decide if you are a hunter or a victim.

Jim Mattis

“Let’s go,” said Rae. “Lead the way to the silo.” Sabine nodded and moved to the exit doors, handgun drawn. Rae followed with the SMG at the ready. He heard boots running towards them in the corridor outside.

“We’ve got company,” he said and stood at the side of the sliding doors. “Take up position over there.”

He pointed to behind the bank of lockers. Sabine darted over and slid in behind. Seconds later, the doors opened. Two soldiers came barreling through, one leading the other. As Rae took aim, the rear guy saw him and struggled against his own momentum, turning clumsily while raising his SMG. The crack of a single shot rang out and the first guy slumped dead from Sabine’s bullet. Rae shot the second guy at close range, the three-round burst sending him sprawling to the ground. He leant down and pocketed a spare magazine from each dead soldier and peeked into the corridor.

“We need to go right,” she said urgently, eyeing the doors.

The glass exploded around his head as muzzle flashes erupted from the right. Rae counted two shooters—one either side of the open double doors at the end of the corridor. If he and Sabine didn’t cross the twenty-meter kill-zone soon, more soldiers would arrive, pinning them down. Another burst cut up the floor near his bare feet, spraying up concrete fragments and dust.

“Swap guns,” he said to Sabine. “Suppressing fire on the end doorway when I move.”

She nodded, taking the SMG and spare mags as he grasped the handgun.

He moved to the sliding door—now shattered and jammed open. On the opposite side of the corridor, to the right—half-way along the kill-zone—was a recessed doorway. The double glass doors were translucent and closed but set back. Would the recess be effective cover? Did enemies lurk behind the doors? No time to delay. The longer they waited, the harder it would get.

“Now!”

Sabine opened up, staging her three-round bursts, suppressing the shooters as Rae sprinted. Her firing stopped, and still running, he saw the guy emerge, taking aim. Rae didn’t break stride, raised the handgun and fired a single shot, hitting the guy’s left shoulder, sending him back to cover. His cries continued from behind the doors at the end, while Rae slid into the recessed doorway, flattening his body from harm. He readied himself to provide covering fire.

“Ready, Sabine?”

“Ready to move!” she called back.

In one swift move, he targeted the doorway. A moment later, the machine-gun-toting soldier emerged and zeroed in on the now running Sabine. Rae fired a single shot. The round struck the enemy’s SMG as it fired, shifting its aim. Sabine ducked reflexively while still running, then executed a combat roll and fired well-controlled bursts at the bogie. Rae seized the moment and advanced on the pinned enemy, covering the ten meters in a little more than a second, arriving to floor the soldier with a pistol-whip. A single round finished him

off. He scanned small lobby to the Cybernetics Lab, with its reception and seating area. It was empty, but the sound of barked orders and running feet told him that wouldn't last.

"Clear!" he called. "Come on, Sabine."

She joined him and grabbed another SMG mag and reloaded.

"Which way?" he said, looking around.

The chatter of approaching jackboots told of a platoon-sized force converging on them.

"We can't take the main tunnels—too much resistance."

The sound of an electric drive grew closer from behind the lobby doors—the armored vehicle he'd seen earlier in the main tunnel.

"You know another way to the silos?"

"There's a panel marked *Services*, over there, behind the reception desk."

"Ok, let's go."

She crouched behind the desk, removed the panel and opened the entry hatch to the space behind the wall. He squeezed his large frame through after her. The tunnel was one-and-a-half meters in diameter, but with most of it taken up by pipes, conduits and cable trays, only the narrowest of accessways remained along the near-side wall. Cabling ran beneath the grating underfoot and a ghostly white light shone from above. He twisted around, replaced the panel and closed the access hatch.

Sabine was already way up ahead, crouch-walking fast, her limp seemingly no impediment. Straining to keep low, the much larger Rae followed awkwardly and uncomfortably in the hot tunnel air. He kept his ears trained for sounds of pursuit, but instead heard the distant blaring of the klaxon, shrill and insistent. It stopped, and he could just make out the muffled PA announcement.

"Attention, attention, attention. Launch from Silo One will commence in five minutes. All personnel to follow launch protocol. I repeat..."

"How far is it?" called Rae.

"Not far," she gasped. "But if they've closed the blast doors we're screwed."

Sabine had stopped up ahead, at the point where the tunnel took a sharp left turn. He waited behind her as she put her ear to the hatch.

"Listen," she said, shuffling forwards to make room.

He listened through the hatch and heard an electric drive cut out then boots on concrete.

"Outside is the main entrance to the silos," she whispered. "There's a huge blast door that can seal off the silos from rest of the bunker."

He pushed his ear harder against the hatch, finger in his left ear to cut the noise of pipes and the buzz of electricity. He made out a commanding voice, the southern drawl somehow familiar.

"Attention!" called a woman's voice.

Boots snapped to attention.

Then it clicked. It was General Hood with his beautiful, robot-like Servile.

A pause, then she continued.

"The general is here to witness the launch," she said. "Open the blast doors, *immediately*."

It surprised him they hadn't sequestered Hood with Sabine and he on the loose. He guessed that whoever ran bunker security thought he could catch them quickly and avoid embarrassing himself in front of the general.

"But—but sir, it's protocol to—" came the guard's voice.

"Just open the damn door, son," said the general. "And get someone to adjust your command hierarchy. My instructions *are* protocol."

"Yessir!" cried the soldier.

"General Hood's here," whispered Rae. "They're opening the blast door to let him through."

"What are we gonna do?" she said.

"I'll take point. Be ready to take up position in the hatch."

She nodded sternly, and he opened the hatch. The whirring of the opening blast door sounded through the panel behind which he hid. He had the element of surprise, but once that panel came off...

"Four minutes to launch," said the PA system.

With no time to waste, he slowly eased down the panel enough to form a gap at the top. An infantry fighting vehicle guarded the silo entrance. General Hood, his aide, and a soldier stood on the nearside of the IFV with another pair of boots behind it, on the far side. To the right of the general, an electric cart—like the one Rae had rode earlier—sat empty, dwarfed by the gray bulk of the armored vehicle. The general brushed his dark moustache with his good hand, tapped his foot impatiently. His Servile aide stared, eyes glazed waiting for the blast door to retract into the ceiling to Rae's left. Beyond it, a wide, dimly-lit tunnel, extended fifty meters through the granite. The end of it was a bright, half-circle of artificial light. In whispers, he conveyed what he saw to Sabine.

"That's where the space-launch silo is—*Silo-1*—straight ahead," she said in a low voice. "The other missile silos are off a branch, halfway down the tunnel,"

General Hood got back into the cart with his aide. The electric drive eased them towards the door. They halted, waiting for the gap to heighten. Moments later, the cart accelerated under the blast door and into the gloomy tunnel. The blast door stopped, then it started closing, a falling curtain on their hopes of thwarting the launch.

The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.

Thomas Jefferson

Sabine said, “Are they closing the door?” with a look of anxiety.

He nodded.

“Just wait... a little longer...” he said, still holding the panel, eyes fixed on the blast door as the sound of Hood’s cart faded.

The near-side soldier now stood to the right of the hatch, the other one still beyond the IFV with its turret facing right, away from the blast door.

“Three minutes to launch,” said the public address system.

“When I move, you need to be right behind,” he said. “Ok?”

“Got it.”

“On me...” he said quietly, easing the panel to the floor, handgun ready.

He exploded out, rolling to a firing position on one knee beside the IFV. The nearest soldier turned too late as Rae planted a double-tap into his face. Diving forwards to go prone, he rolled onto his side and saw the other soldier respond, running. Rae shot him twice in the foot and leg, sending him sprawling as Sabine emerged from the hatch, and scrambled to the closing blast door. Rae finished off the far-side soldier and crawled to the dead guy nearby. The whirl of the closing blast door was joined by the hum of the IFV’s swiveling machine gun seeking a target. He was too close for line of sight, but it wouldn’t be long before one of two things happened—either the IFV would move or one of the two crew would get out. He reached out and rolled the dead guy over onto his back then grabbed the two grenades from his webbing, pocketing them in his lab coat. The blast door was now just half a meter above the deck and closing. Then the IFV started moving. With the tunnel too narrow for a turn, it sped away in the direction of the T-junction in front of it. There it could turn around and once it returned it’d cut them to shreds. He scrambled to his feet and sprinted towards the gap before diving head-first and into a slide on the painted concrete, flattening his body, gliding under the meter-thick door. Friction killed his momentum, leaving his legs under the steel blade. Winded, his nerves pulsed, and he crawled fast, with arms-only as his legs brushed below the blast door under increasing pressure. He winched before snatching out his lagging foot just in time. The door continued into its recess in the floor, then ground to a halt.

“You ok?” said Sabine as he got to his feet.

“All good, but we’ve gotta move,” he said, breaking into a sprint, dashing up the dimly-lit rock tunnel, heading for the light of the silo complex.

The tunnel floor felt icy hard on his bare feet. Echoes of Sabine’s footsteps behind were joined by the sound of the blast door re-opening. The IFV would be waiting behind it with line of sight down the tunnel. Halfway there, he passed the darkened branch tunnel on his left.

“Straight on,” gasped Sabine from behind.

The bright space ahead resolved into a glass-walled control room beyond an open lobby area containing a desk and a guard booth where it met the tunnel. That’s when he detected movement inside the darkened guard booth. Then the lobby lights went out.

“Damn, they’ve spotted—”

The chattering of automatic gun fire sent him to the ground, before he rolled to the tunnel side.

Sabine went prone behind him.

More gunfire sent rock fragments spraying, bullets ricocheting. Ten meters behind them was the branch tunnel. He twisted to see the blast door was half-open, then looked front—fifteen meters to the guard box.

“Two minutes to launch,” said the PA system.

Damn it! We're like fish in a barrel.

“Suppressing fire!” he called over incoming fire.

Sabine opened up, full auto. Lead sparked off the armored booth, suppressing the shooter. Her rounds thumped into the ballistic glass of the control room door.

His adrenaline surged as he sprung up, then sprinted, clasping a grenade and pulling the pin with his teeth. He released the grenade lever. The door to the control room opened. Two more bogies. Sabine raked the lobby with controlled bursts, hitting one, sending the other diving for cover. Rae neared the guard booth and rolled the grenade into it, weighting the throw as best he could. He dived to the floor. Milliseconds later, the frag grenade exploded. His ears rang. Smoke and dust obscured the lobby. Sabine ran fearlessly towards him and the guard-box as he jumped to his feet, handgun drawn. He saw Sabine's muzzle flashes from inside the guard-box as she finished off the guard. Rae advanced, gun drawn. He caught movement to the left of the doors, behind the guard-box and rushed the bogie. *Crack, crack.* Double tap. Dead.

Panicked voices came from inside the control room. The electric buzz of the armored vehicle approached from the tunnel behind. Ballistic glass would be a lace curtain to the IFV's heavy rounds. No way would it fire with the smoke-obscured control room at risk though.

“On me!” said Rae.

Sabine took cover next to the jammed-open sliding door. Three rows of desks faced the huge multi-panel display wall opposite the entrance. A lone, uniformed airman sat at the front control desk, tapping at his personal touchscreen, frequently checking over his shoulder as others cowered under desks. Rae caught a momentary flash of platinum hair—middle desk on the right—General Hood's aide.

And where hides his aide, hides the general.

He counted two other airmen, to the left.

With hand signals, he told Sabine to take out the airmen—he would deal with Hood and his aide. She slotted in a fresh magazine and he gave the signal: *Go, go, go!*

Rat-a-tat-tat from Sabine's SMG, at the same time the *crack-crack* from his handgun, followed by the slump of Hood's aide. The general sprung up, pistol in his robotic hand, face full of fury. Rae squeezed the trigger. *Click.* Nothing.

Shit...

The general's bullets pounded like hammer blows, twisting his torso, first to one side then the next before one to the gut doubled him over.

Where the hell are you, Sabine? he thought desperately, dropping to one knee.

Sabine's uncontrolled burst sent him diving to the deck. Then he heard a slump and looked over at Hood. The general's lifeless eyes stared at him from a few meters away, under the control room desk. For a moment, Rae watched, dazed and in pain as the blood streamed from Hood's mouth, pooling on the floor. Another tyrant slain. Plenty more would arise if they didn't stop the launch.

“I’m hit...” growled Sabine through gritted teeth. “My leg...”

“One minute to launch,” said the PA system.

After the latest impacts to his endo-armor he crawled to Sabine, dazed and hurting.

“It’s ok, it’s ok,” he said, comforting her. “You did great—I owe you big time. Let me take a look at that leg...”

Lower right leg wound. Bad—smashed shin bone, no arteries hit though.

In seconds, he tore off a strip from her pant leg to fashion a dressing.

“I’ll do it,” she said, gasping in pain. “You need to haul ass soldier.”

He nodded and got to his feet.

“Through that door. Quickly,” she said. “You need to stop the launch.”

He dashed to the unmarked steel door and pulled the handle. Locked. No time to kick down the heavy-duty door.

Then he saw the RFID reader beside the handle and fumbled for the chip he’d cut from Dudek’s hand. He pressed the RFID tag to the reader. A short pause, then a green light and the click of the lock. He flung open the door and sped along the short corridor through another door. On the other side was the concrete-walled annular space surrounding the silo. He ran onto the circular steel grating, which circumnavigated the concrete silo. Stairs led to several levels above and below—he was halfway up the fifty-meter-high silo. His body screamed pain; blood from his new wounds had soaked his once-white lab coat. Fighting the hurt, he sprinted to the stairs and dashed up three levels, his lungs and muscles burning.

“T-minus thirty seconds and counting,” said the PA system.

A whoosh of compressed air, then the electric hum of servos.

“Silo doors retracted,” said the PA system.

More clunking sounds of mechanical movement and electric whirring from inside the silo.

He reached the top level and opened the door to the inner silo with the RFID. There in front of him was the payload faring at the top of the rocket. Inside would be ASTRA—the AI that could change the world and spark World War III. If it reached the SS Zenith, enemy scientists would get it working, and President White would launch his global war of extermination.

A short pier of grating extended close to the payload faring, but a second later, it began to retract.

It’s now or ever... he thought, before running to the end and launching himself into the air.

He arced towards the nose cone, reaching for the tip, ignoring the drop below. The payload faring flexed as he slammed into it. He rebounded slightly and fought desperately to get a grip, finally wrapping his arms around the very tip of the rocket. The nose cone was sealed, the tough, lightweight material designed for aerodynamic forces and frictional heating. He shimmied to sit on top of the rocket, smearing its white faring with blood. He took out his handgun. Freezing mountain air spilled down from the dark night into the silo.

“Twenty seconds to launch,” said the PA system.

Gasses hissed from far below, where the main engine stirred. Sparks cascaded from beneath it, lighting up the sump.

Distant small arms fired echoed up the silo stairwell.

Sabine... Hang in there...

He raised the handgun and brought the grip swooping down onto the composite nose cone. A small crack opened, but time was running out. Once the main engine fired he'd be toast. Another whack and...

"Damn it!"

The handgun went tumbling down as he struggled to hang on with one hand. Ignoring his body's protests, he bunched up his fist and pounded the depression created by the gun-grip. Again and again, increasingly rapid, punch after punch. Finally, the composite yielded, exposing the aluminum honeycomb. He kept on punching, his knuckles raw and bleeding, until a hole opened up. And there, inside, barely visible was the gray sphere of ASTRA.

The *rat-a-tat-tat* of automatic gunfire in the background intensified.

Hanging on single-handed, he grasped the grenade from his pocket, pulled the pin with his teeth and dropped the grenade into the punched hole.

"Ten..."

Only seconds left. He pulled himself up, squatting on the nose cone.

"Nine..."

Then he jumped. He sailed towards the narrow door ledge, landing and flattening himself against the door.

"Eight..."

The high-pitched whir of servos joined the hissing around the main engine far below. Next came the hum of a pump starting up somewhere inside the rocket.

"Seven..."

He worked feverishly, precariously, to get through the outwards-opening door, slipping in before he slammed and bolted it shut. There was no going back.

"Six..."

Then came the stifled *boom* of the grenade in the nose cone.

Not enough to destroy ASTRA with that metal sphere around it. Damn it!

"Five... and main engine ignition..."

He got up and looked through the door's view port. The *whoosh* of ignition was followed by a deep rumbling, the stirrings of an angry god making the world quake. Smoke and fiery light filled the silo, obscuring his view as he fought to see what damage the grenade had inflicted. Through the thickening smoke, he thought he saw a narrow seam running up the nose cone—fractionally wider at the top—but couldn't be sure. A moment later, thick smoke stole his view. The launch seemed unhindered.

"Four..."

The rocket vibrated, the engine throttled up.

"Three..."

Faint but insistent in the cacophony, came automatic gunfire from below.

Sabine. The Control Room.

"Two..."

Now urgently fighting its restraints, the rocket roared. Radiant heat overwhelmed the door's thermal insulation forcing him to step back.

"One... and lift-off..."

The rocket rose past the viewport into the night. He'd failed to stop the launch and had no idea if the single grenade had damaged ASTRA beyond repair. The blast had been puny compared to the awesome power of the rocket and ASTRA's metal containment sphere looked sturdy.

"Damn it!" he shouted, then turned and bolted down the stairs.

He had to get to Sabine, injured and outgunned. Then the gunfire from the Control Room ceased. Trapped and unarmed, he ignored the pain. He kept descending the staircase, dripping blood, waiting to face overwhelming force. It felt like he was descending into Hell.

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.

Desmond Tutu

He continued bolting down the stairs in great pain. He checked that the wasp-drone was still there. His fingers felt the hard, metallic drone in the pocket.
Are you there, Dr Muller? he mind-spoke.

Silence.

He arrived at the control room door, breathless, bloody and battered.

Rat-a-tat-rat-a-tat.

The renewed gunfire meant one thing: Sabine was still fighting.

He crouched and threw open the door. Sabine lay prone, within arm's reach. She fired a controlled burst under the desk. Return fire from multiple shooters converged on the wall, upper door and guard booth. The deep staccato of .50 cal fire raked the control room. Only the three rows of steel desks and the guard booth were saving Sabine. He saw two soldiers entering the far side of the control room.

"They're flanking us!" called Rae over the fire-fight, noticing the blood oozing from the makeshift bandage on her lower right leg.

She looked around, teeth gritted, her face pained and colorless.

"Get out of here!" she said. "I can't run, but you *can*."

The firefight died. Next came the *plink-plink-plink* of a grenade landing somewhere nearby. Frantically, he sought it out.

There!

He found it beside Sabine, before scrambling and crawling towards the death-ball. Grabbing it within milliseconds, he tossed it at the flanking enemy. He rolled on top of Sabine to shield her as the grenade air-burst, spewing supersonic shrapnel. A sharp pain registered in his left arm and blood grew around the neat tear in the lab coat's material.

"We need to fall back!" he said into her ear.

She nodded, and he rolled off her.

He crawled back to the steel door, which had closed itself. The Infantry Fighting Vehicle focused its spotlight on the door, silhouetting the outline of more troops infiltrating the room. Reaching up with the RFID to unlock the door, he held it open with his legs while pulling Sabine across the floor and through the doorway. Fragments of debris peppered the air as the intensifying barrage of gunfire raked the control room before converging on the door. Rounds *thumped* into the steel door, a staccato of deadly drumbeats hunting their quarry. Aggressive shouts and boots on concrete came between burst of gunfire. He looked up and saw the RFID scanner had been pulverized. Another *plink-plink* and he slammed the door shut. *Boom*. The steel door bulged, the shock wave from the grenade thumped his core. With ears ringing, he slipped the SMG from Sabine, slung it over his chest by its strap and picked her up. He carried her up flight after flight of steel stairs. As he cradled her in his arms she looked faint, exhausted, but her resolute visage remained. In that moment, she reminded him of Cora and her gutsy determination in the fight for their lives against the *Langostas* during the insurgency. She was tough in the face of adversity, her survival instinct strong. It gave him heart that she would

pull through whatever terrible situation she was now dealing with in Chicago. He felt his strength surge at the thought of Cora and began taking two stairs at a time. He would not rest until he held her again.

The gunfire below had ceased. The silo was silent but for his heavy, sonorous footsteps. On reaching the top level, he placed Sabine gently on the grating and peered into the dimly-lit silo. The rocket had flown. The circle of night sky remained, but he didn't know how much longer the launch doors would stay open. And now it was the only way out. Without escape, only death or the undead life of slavery awaited them. He opened the door, its handle still hot from the launch. A wave of hot air greeted him as he ducked his head into the silo and saw the pier of grating still retracted into the wall. He felt to the right of the doorway and found what he thought he'd noticed—one the recesses built into the concrete, each housing a metal rung. Above and below were more footholds or handholds. It wouldn't be easy though. Their window of escape was closing rapidly. But it was a chance. Their only chance.

He squatted and helped the now placid Sabine to her feet, leaning her against the wall for support.

"Piggy-back," he said, getting in front of her.

"My leg..." she moaned quietly.

"I'll be careful."

He helped her mount his back, pushed open the door and reached for the foothold, grabbing onto a rung above his head.

"Hold on tight—you mustn't let go," he said.

She interlocked her fingers around his lower neck and he began to haul their combined weight, climbing the rungs, his muscles screaming in protest. The closer they got to the surface, the cooler grew the air, the darker grew the star-filled mountain sky. At the top, the last wisps of exhaust gasses flowed from the silo's rim, dispersing in the breeze.

"Nearly there," he said.

"Ok," she murmured.

A final grunt of exertion and they emerged from the silo before he collapsed onto the powdery snow. Sabine lay on top of him, her breathing shallow, moaning softly. The narrow, steep valley surrounded the silo from all sides—the perfect location. He looked up at the starfield of the Milky Way. The glow of the rocket's plume lit up the sky to the east, its orangey light scattering off its faint smoke trail. Its trajectory morphed almost imperceptibly with each passing second, becoming less vertical, more inclined in the early stages of its right-angle turn.

From somewhere behind the nearest ridge, he heard the whine of an electric drive, distant calls carried on the cold night air. A fainter sound came from the opposite direction—different but familiar—deeper, more guttural, more like a *whoosh*.

A *boom* echoed up the silo, then a *crash* and the unmistakable clatter of troops running up the silo's metal stairwell.

Rae got out from under Sabine, laying her gently on her back, and readied the SMG, covering the silo. He knew the soldiers had monoculars on their helmets. If he and Sabine ran now, they'd be lit up like a Christmas tree on infrared against the snow and cold.

From far-off in the eastern sky sounded a deep *boom*, echoes sent bouncing, attenuating around the hard granite valley. He swung around to see multiple streaks of burning light high in the sky where the rocket had

been. The largest flare continued on a similar but declining trajectory, while smaller burning fragments diverged like a firework, showering back to earth, air resistance and gravity, irresistible and relentless. The damaged nose cone had conspired with velocity to destabilize the rocket, destroying it. Surely destroying ASTRA.

Calvin Rae, said voice of a man in his head, the accent Nordic, melodic. This is the DASIS station, El Paso-Juarez. You have inbound drone for extraction. ETA two minutes.

The wasp-drone must have found the relay signal now they were above ground.

Acknowledged. Standing by for extraction, mind-spoke Rae.

The jet engine of the approaching drone grew from the west. Rae squatted down and picked up Sabine, who was now drowsy, as white as the snow and cold to the touch. Blood dripped from her soaked bandage, and his multiple wounds, leaving a trail of red on the snow as he trudged away from the silo rim. The clatter of the opening door, followed by the exertions of soldiers scaling rungs, rose from the launch silo.

The Alliance drone sounded closer now—somewhere just beyond the ridge to the west. Rae put Sabine down and lay prone, SMG trained on the silo opening, wondering how many rounds he had left.

Where is that drone? We're about to go hot! he mind-spoke to the DASIS controller.

Thirty seconds until eyes on extraction zone.

Rae saw the first soldier poked his head above the silo rim thirty meters away. He then reached up, and pulled down his helmet-mounted monocular, seeking his target. Rae lay beside Sabine in his blood-stained white lab coat, his SMG sights trained on the enemy. The soldier swept his aim, searching, then settling on Rae's azimuth before saying something then hauling himself over the threshold and rolling to the side to allow the next guy up. Now they'd found him, Rae couldn't let them have time to zero in.

He checked the selector was on burst then squeezed the trigger, lighting up the snowfield, the muzzle flash degrading his vision. No return fire came, and he saw he'd hit the first guy, but the second soldier was already prone and taking aim as the third one climbed out. Simultaneously the enemy muzzle flashed. Fountains of snow kicked up in front of Rae, like a veil of quickly dispersing powder. Even with his endo-armor, he couldn't take hits forever—a bullet would find a gap, or he'd bleed out next Sabine on the snow.

The drone was close, the roar of its jet engines growing exponentially.

An incoming volley of enemy fire skimmed over him, shockwaves pulsing past his face. Then came another barrage, thumping into the ground beside him. A sinking feeling told him the next bullet wouldn't miss. He had to suppress them. Cora flashed through his mind as he squeezed, willing his next burst to be enough. *Click. Click.* Out of ammo.

"Damn it!"

They'd come so far.

He looked at Sabine, her eyes drowsy, her face weak. She was brave. Too young to die. He rolled over to shield Sabine from the salvo of death that was soon to come.

"Where's evac?" she croaked.

If that damned drone is armed, you better open up now on—

Then it came. A ferocious barrage erupted from the night sky, relentlessly pummeling the silo rim. The drone screamed towards it and decelerated at an astonishing rate to hover over the silo and strafe the inside with withering heavy caliber fire. The huge, armored drone paused in mid-air, ten meters above the silo, the whine of its vectored jets drowning out all other sound. The pitch dropped, and it throttled down, sliding towards Rae and

Sabine, descending gently, its downdraft blowing a blizzard. Four landing struts telescoped out of the underside and it touched down, engines still running, powder swirling, enveloping the craft.

“Hostile territory search and rescue drone,” she murmured.

“We need to move—enemy armor’s closing in!” he said.

A ramp descended, revealing the inside bathed in dim red light. He picked up Sabine and lay her down inside on one of the two stretchers. He strapped her in, then pulled himself onto the adjacent stretcher. The deep percussion of the enemy’s .50cal rounds died as the ramp slammed shut. Incoming lead thudded against the drone’s armor. It lifted off, powerful vibrations rocking the airframe as it returned fire. Rae rolled with the movement, pushed solidly against his back and feet by the beginnings of acceleration, while clicking in place his harness. A burst of hostile rounds thumped hard against the side-armor, forcing the drone into a wobble. Thrust vectoring worked with gyroscopes to stabilize it, before the roar of the jet engines grew loud. As they accelerated away, he reached across to the medical kit but had to abort—a *whoosh* from outside, followed by a powerful explosion sent his world tumbling.

Surface-to-air missile, said his dazed mind.

His stomach lurched as they began falling, still spinning, uncontrolled. A warning sound beeped urgently. Fierce blasts from the vectored jets halted the spin, righted the drone, and arrested the fall to earth. He held on tight as the drone went full power with terrifying acceleration. Its evasive maneuvers threw him side-to-side and against the restraints. He looked over to Sabine and held her hand, trying to give some comfort. But he could see she lacked the strength to resist the g-forces, instead flopping and rolling while constrained by the harness. Another *whoosh* came from nowhere, but this time no explosion. He felt his body go zero-g as the drone dived faster than freefall. When it bottomed out, blood rushed to his head then slowly subsided as it flew more-or-less level.

The enemy fire stopped. The warning sound stopped. He let out a long overdue breath and loosened his harness slightly before reaching for the med-kit. He re-dressed Sabine’s wounded leg with a nanite repair powder, followed by synthetic skin patch to stem the blood flow. After infusing her with vials of synthetic blood and pain killers, color returned to her face, her blood pressure began to recover. He then set about treating his own wounds, starting with the shrapnel in his arm. The other impacts had torn skin, gorged flesh, and dented endo-armor but hadn’t penetrated. The endo-armor had saved him, that was for sure. One day, in a more peaceful time, he’d have it removed though. That day hadn’t come yet. From what he’d seen, it might be a long wait.

The drone accelerated at a fearsome rate, staying low, throwing his weight this way and that, tracking evasively through the valleys and canyons; then above ridges and down over the foothills of the Rockies, ever westward. Now flying straight—he guessed somewhere over what used to be Utah—resurgent g-forces heralded the sonic boom as they breached the sound barrier, climbing high into the night sky.

“How are you feeling now?” he said.

“I’ll live,” she croaked, managing a smile, her eyes still drowsy.

“Any idea where we’re going?”

“Westward... the Pacific... a sub,” she said, her words trailing off, eyes closing sleepily.

He checked her breathing and pulse, then her blood pressure with the monitor—much better. She’d need surgery to repair the splintered leg bone, but it was nothing beyond modern medicine.

She drifted off to sleep. A few minutes later he did the same.

My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth.

Abraham Lincoln

Rae sat on the commercial flight from Vancouver to Paris. The physical exertions and the emotions wrung out of him over the last week had left him exhausted. Yet natural sleep was still hard to come by, and when it did come it was inhabited by visions of the dead and memories of Cora. Within minutes of awakening, he'd feel the fresh sting of tears. Already it had happened twice in the last few hours on the flight to Europe. Most of those tears were for Cora, his dear, brave wife, a victim of a monstrous system. There were many millions more victims living under the Regime's odious rule. In comparison, normal civilian life in Democratic Alliance countries seemed so free, so alien to Rae. It was a life Cora deserved, and he would stop at nothing to get her back. The concept of freedom of movement within and between nations felt strangely novel. And the people were... different. Alive. Engaged. Seemingly full of hope, awash with the insecurities of everyday life—the normal human condition, at odds with the nightmarish reality in the once-great country he'd left behind. It had become an open prison, benefitting the few at the expense of the many. Now he was in the free world, the oppressive blanket of paranoia had lifted, he could be himself—think, speak and act authentically without fearing the consequences. Just the simple calculus of reasonable behavior was all it took here. Under the Regime, the reckoning was infinitely more complex for someone of free mind. He wondered how many others were like he had been, free of mind yet still living amongst the Citizens and Serviles of the American Union. He hoped the Alliance had an entire army of sleepers waiting for the crucial times to come, waiting to attack the Regime from within. Such a Fifth Column was more hope than knowledge though.

Cora dominated his mind whenever left alone with his thoughts. Distraction was sometimes a welcome relief. He pulled down the virtual reality headset, placing it over his head and switching to the rolling news channel.

The caption read, *Breaking News – Waves of Attacks in American MOZ.*

He sat up, suddenly awake, his mind buzzing.

Aerial footage filled the screen as the news presenter questioned a former British Army general about the implications. The video showed a wooded area with a multi-lane highway littered with rusting vehicles and debris, weeds and saplings invading the cracked asphalt. A disused freeway, somewhere in the Badlands. A rag-tag stream of people ran across the freeway from the forest on the right to the forest on the left. Rae estimated at least fifty men, women and children crossing the clearing at any one time, some looking over their shoulders as they ran.

“We believe these civilians are being herded,” said the British army guy. “Herded from a local settlement in the Badlands.”

The civilians—Illegals, in Regime-speak—kept on coming.

“Herded by who or what?” said the presenter.

“Well, obviously the AU military. The military's mostly made up of Serviles, as they're called. Basically, a slave army. It's been such a hermetically sealed society for so long now, that I think we forget just how brainwashed the population is.”

A few seconds later, some of the fleeing civilians fell. The footage was soundless, but when the next few went sliding to the deck, Rae thought he saw gunfire at the edge of the frame. Tears welled in his eyes as he relived the terrible deeds he himself had committed. His heart ached not only for the fleeing civilians, but for the puppet soldiers doing the killing. The worst thing was they'd be fully aware of their actions yet feel the righteousness flowing alongside the adrenaline high of the kill. And if they ever became free like him, they'd remember everything. He blinked away the tears and continued to watch.

"And there you can see it... the pursuers opening fire," said the Brit. "As we've come to expect, the Regime has no qualms about committing war crimes. It really is a stain on humanity."

Then a flight of four large, slow-moving, prop drones traced the path of their prey. A dark mist trailed the wings of each drone as they skimmed the forest and freeway.

"And what are we seeing here, General?"

"This, I'm afraid, is what's been reported in several places in the Badlands since last night," he said, sighing as the clip recycled to the beginning. "Sprayer drones, shells and missiles delivering nanites. That's the dust coming out of the planes. These nanites are nasty—they're *designed* to eat the human body alive, using its molecules to self-replicate."

"Is this a genocide we're witnessing here, General?" said the presenter darkly.

"I'm afraid it may be the beginning of it, yes," he said gravely. "At the moment it looks like they're field testing over limited areas, but I wouldn't be surprised if they expanded the attack very soon."

"Why aren't we doing something about it?"

"The Alliance has a long-standing policy to respond with all-out counter-attack should any member state be subjected to an aggressor's first-strike. The AU daren't attack on foreign soil, but I'm afraid it's a very different matter on their own territory."

"Again: why aren't we stepping in to stop this genocide, General?"

The general sighed.

"Look, that's a question for our politicians. And the simple truth of the matter is that they can't go in heavy-handed without provoking World War III."

Rae switched off the depressing news. He'd helped thwart the Regime, denying them ASTRA. Dominating cyberspace would've tipped the balance of power, making a World War III victor viable. But the carnage *inside* the American Union continued apace. And Cora was still trapped in another part of the nightmare, albeit away from the genocide in the Badlands.

Since his medical treatment and debrief on the Canadian carrier sub, *CS Quebec*, he could hardly stop thinking about Cora. The feelings of guilt, of failure to rescue her, sapped the joy of freedom and mission success. Now he had time to reflect. Before distraction had kept his angst at bay. Now the crushing helplessness of leaving Cora behind depressed his very soul. Every time he thought of her, trapped, controlled, as Oliver Young's mistress, anger welled up before transforming to sadness then despair at his impotence. It was like an endless cycle of emotion, his mind too weary to find solutions or solace. He was too tired to deal with it, so decided on more distraction to numb the pain. Technology gave as well as took. He pressed the button on his arm rest and an encoded, dancing pattern of shapes filled his vision, while sleep-inducing music played into his ears. No need for faster planes and flatbeds when near-instant natural sleep was available on-tap via the VR headset. The audio-visual show conspired to hack his brain, sending him into a deep sleep.

A week later, Rae strolled along beside the River Seine in the late-morning sunshine. A crisp winter's day in Paris, alive with tourists and locals, having fun, living with purpose, falling in love. People living life. Freedom from tyranny. Liberty, fraternity, equality. Ok, it was still a work-in-progress, but an exemplar nonetheless. People on the top deck of a passing tourist boat smiled and waved at anyone who'd pay attention. He waved back as streams of delivery and passenger drones crisscrossed the skies, flowing constrained in their invisible lanes, freeing the surface for more civilized pursuits. A group of school kids stopped in front of him, their teacher explaining something about the grand façade on the opposite bank. Rae forced a smile and nodded to the teacher as he passed, but there was little humor in his eyes. The events happening half a world away seemed impossible on a day like this. He walked on, wishing one day to take such a stroll with Cora by his side. Every time something lifted his heart, it was instantly crushed at the thought of what she might be going through. Was she scared, lonely? Had she been abused, *raped*? He shuddered at the thought. All he could do was stay focused on the mission find a way to exfiltrate her as soon as humanly possible. He would not rest, could not rest, until that day.

He continued, towards the pre-arranged place, towards the meet. On the bench sat a middle-aged woman in a black peacoat, black beret and big designer shades. Beside her, a younger, blonde woman wore a brown leather jacket and jeans, her right leg in a ski-boot cast, crutches rested upright against the bench. Dr Stephanie Muller spotted him approach, breaking into a reserved smile. She nudged her daughter Sabine, who beamed as Dr Muller stood to greet him.

He held out his hand to shake, but she hugged him instead.

"Cal," she said with joy and relief, "thank you for saving my Sabine."

He bent down to hug Sabine, whose shades couldn't hide the battering she'd taken.

"I saved his ass too," said Sabine, grinning.

"It's true," he said. "And thank *you*, Dr Muller."

"You're most welcome, Cal," said Dr Muller, sitting back down, making space for Rae in the middle. "And I must say, you two make quite a team,"

He sat down. They felt like old friends—the kind of friendship forged in common purpose, a life-and-death endeavor.

"Finished your DASIS debriefing?" said Dr Muller, referring to the series of meetings he'd had that week with the Democratic Alliance's intelligence service.

"Thought you'd know," he said.

"Not anymore," she said matter-of-factly. "I've been... What did he call it...? *Retired*."

"Oh."

"Disobeying orders, going dark... Apprehended trying to cross into enemy territory at the Mexican border."

"You were just doing what any mother would do," said Sabine.

"Ha... I wasn't even your handler... I got off lightly."

“They’re more forgiving than *my* former employers, that’s for sure,” said Rae. “So what about you, Sabine?”

“Still fighting the good fight, Cal,” said Sabine, handing him her sleek sunglasses, her blue eyes squinting in the sunlight.

“You’ve been debriefed,” she said. “You’re one of us now, Cal.”

He looked at her quizzically.

“Put them on,” she said.

He put on her shades. Single words appeared on the lenses in quick succession.

The assault on all twelve Sanctuary Cities started five days ago, prompted by the escalating genocide in the MOZ. Alliance assets simultaneously released millions of wasp-drones in the cities. Using red-light deprogramming, each continues to seek out mindchipped Citizens and Serviles, deactivating their neural implants. The Regime and wider population have been split into two factions—the Freethinkers and the Regime, led by President White. Civil war is imminent. The Democratic Alliance is working hard to support the Freethinkers, without provoking a WMD response from President White’s faction. DASIS have extracted dozens of key Freethinkers from enemy territory. Hopes are high of a successful overall outcome. However, the wildcards are Russia and China, who already have a presence in the MOZ. When your R&R period is complete, you will be briefed fully on your next mission. End of message.

He removed the glasses.

“We need to go,” said Sabine.

Sabine, reached for her crutches and pushed herself off the bench, Dr Muller helping her up.

“Wait a minute!” he said to Sabine. “What about Cora? If you want me to work for you then I’m going back for her first. Non-negotiable.”

Sabine reached out her hand.

“Glasses, please.”

He returned her shades.

“Well?” he said.

“Have a little faith, Calvin Rae,” said Sabine with a sparkle in her eyes before she put on her shades.

He sat there, confused at the response.

“It was a pleasure, Cal,” said Dr Muller with a nod and a smile.

“See you next week,” said Sabine, turning to leave, Dr Muller giving a small wave.

“O—kay…” said Rae, confused at them ignoring what he’d said quite firmly about his priority in getting Cora back.

He knew she was just one of millions of victims of the Regime, but surely they knew how much it meant to him. Why no update on Cora, no plan—or even an outline of a plan—as to how they were going to get her out? Maybe this had been a mistake. Maybe he’d traded one puppet-master for another. A sinking feeling drained any residual joy he’d felt from seeing Dr Muller and Sabine.

“Bye then,” he said numbly, lost for any better words.

He watched Sabine and her mother disappear around the bend of the curved walkway. Checking his watch, he hauled himself off the bench and turned back towards his hotel and started walking on autopilot, lost in thought.

Something caught his attention up ahead on the path. He raised his downcast eyes, resolving the splash of red his peripheral vision had found. Her dark, wavy hair caught the breeze and lifted off her red coat, as her sleek legs moved with increasing urgency towards him. Cora's smile grew unrestrained. They locked eyes and he felt like they were the only two people in the world. Her pace quickened, and she started running as he did the same, his arms ready to embrace, his beaming face breaking into laughter. Wrapped in her arms, he kissed her like he'd never kissed her before. Tears welled in his eyes as his fears evaporated, banished by powerful rays of joy. The darkness gave way to the light she had brought.

Until tomorrow came, he would enjoy their hard-won freedom. The battle raged on. The war had only just begun. And come what may, he would return to America and fight against tyranny in the Land of the Free.

The End

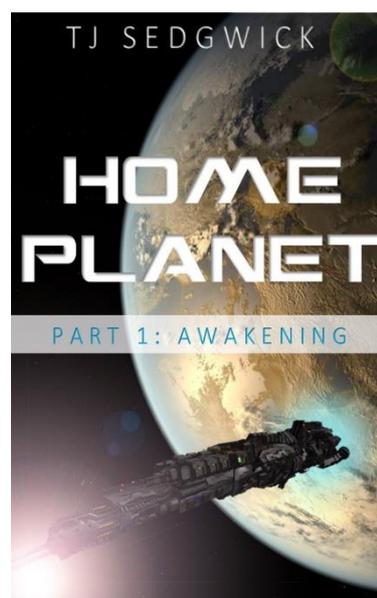
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