

To Grandpa

Chapter One

A little over 6,500 years ago, a team of military members in a control room regained their composure while operating the vehicle that floated toward their main destination, high above the thick and wild rainforest canopy. A bomb had just detonated, sending an expanse of the forest floor—complete with soaring trees, boulders, and wildlife—straight into the foggy air, aimed at any foreign passersby. Projectiles shook the vehicle, and the culinary experts on the bottom floor surfed to maintain balance as the glider absorbed the impacts. The alert team quickly accelerated to avoid most of the flying debris, but everyone knew that Jaway’s quick reflexes had saved the day. A few scoops of mud splattered onto one of the outer windows of the upper control room, dripping down before the automatic cleaners cleared them away.

“Another tough one, guys, but we made it!” Jaway said, catching his breath.

A bead of sweat seemed to fall in slow motion from the tip of his narrow nose onto his shoe. He lifted his foot to wipe the sweat onto the calf of the other leg. After clearing his face swiftly with a forearm, he turned his head to watch the remaining forest fall through the cloudy canopy and back into the open crater within the sea of green.

“Make sure to note that exact location for Central Command,” Jaway said.

“Affirmative, Commander!” said T. A. Curtis, one of Jaway’s dedicated terrain analysts, before a preprogrammed air video popped up from a small pyramid fixed to the control panel.

A stunning woman dressed in a fashionable, form-fitting version of infantry gear spoke with motivational undertones: “Congratulations,

Commander Barbour and the team, for your continued service to our people. By gathering information, you are leading us toward the goal of completely uniting The Land, from the west coast mountain range through the vast central rainforest, to the highlands in the east and the plains in the south. Remember that you are a catalyst for peace, and in order to gain political rest, any group rebelling against these ideals must either integrate or be subdued. Your families back home are incredibly proud of everything you do! Because of your valor, you will all receive special rewards tonight after you dock.”

The adrenaline-filled team slowly looked around, and then the fifteen crew members transformed from shock to celebration within a second. They jumped and hooted and hollered about the upcoming rewards. Morale was a huge priority, and a tool used to keep military members inspired to continue. Back in Jaway’s hometown of Zander, he’d never imagined he would lead a troop through the most dangerous and remote regions of civilization in search of information about tribes that were not yet loyal to The Land. Different regions had merged over time to create the country that now stretched from coast to coast, but the Wild Territory in the north was still in revolt.

After Jaway had finalized his first round of training at age sixteen along with his neighborhood friends, he was identified as a leader with high ability scores and moved on to a special academy for his last year of studies. In The Land, military service was compulsory, and after finishing school requirements, each resident was assigned to a branch for three years. This period was usually from the ages of either eighteen to twenty-one or nineteen to twenty-two, unless it was deferred for a major reason. Because citizens received full adult rights by age sixteen and usually moved away from home a few years later, by the time most people reached age twenty, they were quite sophisticated.

“Can you find out what the reward is, Commander?” whispered A. P. Krizzles. She winked and elbowed Jaway playfully, then flashed her eyes from corner to corner, pretending nobody else could hear. He smiled—she always treated him like a big brother.

After he checked the information briefing, Jaway’s voice rang throughout all three levels of the vehicle, which was known as a glider. “Tonight, ingredients for home-cooked meals will be delivered, we will be granted extra free time, and we will all receive double compensation for the day!”

The crew’s celebration grew even more raucous for a few minutes,

and then they returned to their essential duties.

Many years before this moment, the Royal Academy of Technology had uncovered components of the human mind that changed the trajectory of technology for the entirety of civilization. This began when the emperor commanded the Royal Academy to investigate ways to improve production in factories, with a focus on an assembly line that manufactured coins for The Land. He wanted to know how the operators could increase focus and reduce mistakes, and then to apply that knowledge to similar operations.

With a focus on brain function, the academic team made it clear to the mint workers that they were not being reprimanded—the researchers simply wanted to study the way the brain worked. The staff recorded data each time an error occurred, then shared freely about what had happened. During a survey, many coiners described feeling as though they were on autopilot, because each of them performed one task, then passed their materials to a neighbor to accomplish the next one. This was repeated until the product was complete and ready for inspection.

During one logged instance, an employee said that when they heard five beeps, they would walk across the large room where they worked to press a button that introduced a new design for the next material. In this case, silver metal sheets rolled on an assembly line to where they were placed under a stamp machine that would engrave the coin design. Gold sheets automatically replaced the previous metal; however, the insignia needed to be changed by hand.

One day, there was no notification, and the worker was not prompted to press the button. Because the operator assumed they'd already completed the task, the gold coins received the wrong design, which was only spotted during inspection toward the end of the process. When the worker tried to access memories from that day, they assumed they had finished the routine, but did not remember clearly.

The analysts agreed that the coiner was performing duties through the subconscious mind, and this was why they described the shift as foggy, occurring in a trancelike state. Upon looking at other studies, the researchers concluded that this was a common experience for all humans. This other part of the mind was responsible for any brain functions that had become automatic, like walking, breathing, eye movements, or learned skills. While the subconscious mind could control multiple thoughts simultaneously, the researchers believed the conscious mind was only accountable for a small percentage of

thoughts. The study also concluded that this was the reason why people were not generally successful at multitasking. Completing many operations at the same time resulted in mistakes.

With this in mind, the Academy advised employees to focus on one project at a time, and move to another job only when the previous one was fully executed.

From this study, a creative analyst designed a piece of technology that could monitor subconscious cognitive functions. After training with it, the brain could control external devices in the same way it controlled things like running or moving a finger. With this advancement, people could easily send thoughts to a gadget to look up information or compile words for a report. The problem up until this point was that inventions could process information at high speeds, yet citizens could only input small amounts of data, and this was incredibly slow. The innovation of sending information directly to a mechanism removed the glacial practice of entering characters of written language and resulted in rapid input and output. After many years of trial and error, innovators developed a small chip called a kleck. Implanted into ear cartilage, the kleck exported information at rapid speeds from the brain to devices.

Jaway was highly proficient at operating his kleck, and he used it to control the glider and interact with many different tools. During Jaway's lifetime, all babies were issued a kleck at birth so that each person developed motor movements and kleck skills at the same time. Baby toys and toddler gadgets transitioned with all stages of growth, morphing into more complex items. As children developed the ability to read and write, they also studied how to utilize the kleck with a myriad of mechanisms. Surprisingly, people could learn to control innovations with the same instant subconscious control that was used routinely in daily life. It was just as easy as standing up.

One of the instruments projected text into the air and allowed the user to write as fast as they could think. When Jaway was growing up, he could write a short composition in a matter of minutes because the kleck allowed massive amounts of information to transfer at the blink of an eye. As he began taking academics more seriously throughout school, he quickly stood out as highly skilled at controlling external devices. Not only was he proficient in transferring information, he also picked up new concepts quickly and effortlessly, to the point that he was at the top of his class in ability to manipulate machinery.

Military academy training occurred alongside regular classes

around age seventeen or eighteen, and lasted one full year. All citizens knew they would serve in the military, but they did not know in which capacity until they were granted an assignment after graduation. Because of Jaway's advanced ability and high interpersonal reliability test scores, he received training for operating machinery and effectively leading groups of people. Jaway was enamored with the way he might be able to apply the many years of serious studies in practical situations. During indoctrination classes, he dreamed of increasing peace among The Land and making the world a better place. If only he'd known how his service would play out.

Jaway and his team often spent free time comparing what it was like to grow up with different backgrounds and regional influences. They were fascinated that although many facets of life were markedly different, they'd all grown up with deep connections to family and friends. This was because all localities of The Land shared a common culture that deeply prioritized close interpersonal relationships. Households from each territory of The Land spent countless hours together; helping one another and enjoying rich company over meals or group activities. It was not uncommon for families to hug or hold hands while out for a walk. Close friends showed different physical forms of affection but bonded just as intensely.

A. P. Krizzles was the most attractive member of Jaway's team. She had been granted sincerity and humility in equal amounts to her beauty. Her long, flowing, wavy hair was usually pulled back to reveal a sharp jawline, high-edged cheekbones, and light-gray eyes that sparkled and reflected surrounding colors. Long, dark eyelashes framed her uniquely colored eyes. People often stared directly into her pupils and felt like everything in the world stopped. Babies and toddlers were drawn to her perfectly proportioned face and could not break their gaze, no matter how hard they tried. While waiting in supermarket lines, crying babies would become silent and lock in on what they saw as a twinkly, gorgeous, mysterious being.

Although it was hard to believe, A. P. Krizzles was mostly unaware of her own beauty and usually was embarrassed by extra attention. As a girl who grew up humbly, raising animals and tending flax crops with her extended family, she always wondered why people stared directly into her eyes like they were hypnotized. A young, fit body and clear, glowing skin were the natural byproducts of enjoying sports while growing up and staying active on the family farm in the Eastern Highlands.

Every generation on record from A. P. Krizzles's bloodline were farmers, so each person who contributed to her DNA had honed skills that were necessary on the land to successfully grow crops or raise livestock. These highly sensitive agrarians could smell impending rain or feel that a storm was on the way. It was their job to be keenly aware of any change in the surroundings in order to keep their livelihoods safe by protecting animals or strategically harvesting fields. Research from the Royal Academy of Knowledge concluded that heightened senses were passed down through DNA, as was the case with A. P. Krizzles. Military teams had incredible respect for any agricultural personnel, because this unique ability allowed them to sense danger or signals from nature. In the past, many agricultural personnel had provided invaluable information about animal activity and warned troops of hazards like tsunamis, tornados, and uncontrolled fires. This allowed their teams to take more advantageous positions and remain safe from destruction.

Jaway and his comrades were sent to high-risk zones because of their expertise and courage, in contrast to other teams that lacked the skills to succeed in comparable environments. Although Jaway's troop was elite and functioned at a high level, they did not take each other too seriously. It was their job to gather information about outlying groups or tribes, and they avoided any combat. Traveling through uncharted, wild, and remote territories came with many unique challenges. Weaving through the skies above the lush rainforest could be risky and unforgiving.

In addition to natural factors, manmade obstacles included rebel groups, which frequently planted bombs that detected vehicles. These foes kept them on their toes. There were also no light beams outlining road paths in these skies, so the operators had to create their own routes while avoiding any possible dangers along the way. In developed areas of The Land, an intricate web of lights created driving lanes, around the height of three standard homes above the ground. These lanes were parallel to the ground, with one direction on the top in purple, and the opposite direction just below in orange. This design prevented crashes and kept drivers safe, but occasionally something would still fall from the sky. Architects installed roofs of heavy marble or stone in some regions for added safety. Looking through crafted windows on the vehicles revealed the sky roads, which were not visible to the naked eye. Avoiding light pollution was a priority so that people could still watch the stars at night, as this was a standard

hobby. While drivers retained overall control, transportation automatically sensed the beams and remained within the lanes.

The crew members commonly referred to each other by using the first letters of the colleague's job title followed by their last name. For example, Agricultural Personnel Krizzles was shortened to A. P. Krizzles. More informally, others would call her by only her last name, Krizzles. The main exceptions to the standard abbreviations were for the commander, lieutenant commander, and captain out of respect for the three highest-ranking members of the crew. So Lieutenant Commander Pama would not be shortened to L. C., though she could still informally be addressed as Pama.

In contrast to smaller passenger gliders, Jaway's military glider had eight walls with clear windows from floor to ceiling, along with three inner levels. The bottom of the octagonal prism housed many rooms, including the kitchen, living quarters, gym, and engine room. The level above this contained the lower control room, and the next story was the upper control room, which provided views in every direction. An elevator ran in the center up to the rooftop. Thankfully, the bomb planted by the rebel group only damaged the outer front side of the glider. These and many other technological advancements empowered The Land to unite most regions from coast to coast.