

TRIALS OF ASH  
VOLUME ONE

LEGACY  
OF A MAD  
SCIENTIST

JOHN  
CARRICK



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"First, I'd like to know, do any of you have experience in the martial arts?"

About half the hands went up. Ashley didn't raise her hand, despite two previous summers of similar courses; she did not count herself as experienced.

"Now, how many of you have been hit, hard, in the face?" Sihing Shou asked.

At first several hands went up, but some were timid, uncertain.

"I mean really hit hard; bloody nose, fat lip, black eye. How many?"

Only a few hands remained aloft.

Shou pointed to one boy and asked, "Who hit you?"

"My brother hits me all the time," he said, pointing at his brother, standing a few spaces away.

Shou and several others laughed. Ashley noticed that the boy, however, was not laughing. She suspected he was very interested in how to put a stop his brother's dominance.

"And you?" Shou gestured to another boy.

"My father," came the answer.

Shou pointed again.

"A kid in my class."

"Has anyone here ever been hit while in the ring?" Shou asked.

All the hands went down.

"When you are in a fight, if you are ever in a fight, you must fight for your life. It will be at that moment when you are weak, tired, probably very hurt, that is when you must act to save your life. We will help you get to that place and teach you how to think while you're there."

Instructor Shou walked along the front of the room. "Someone may come; an outlaw, the government, a king, they may take all of your possessions. They may steal your clothes, eat your food and burn down your house, but you can survive all of that.

"You may have nothing, but you will never be defenseless. Knowledge is the greatest power and it is something no one can see. It cannot be stolen or broken. No one can take it from you.

"When you leave here, you will be in possession of new knowledge. You will know things you did not know when you arrived. You will have earned it, paid for it in sweat and blood and it will be worth much more than money."

*LEGACY OF A MAD SCIENTIST*

*JOHN CARRICK*

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First Edition

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# **LEGACY OF A MAD SCIENTIST**

## **Trials of Ash Volume One**

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to you, the reader.

I sincerely hope you enjoy *The Legacy of a Mad Scientist*.

Please stay tuned to Alpha Channel Books for the next volume in the *Trials of Ash*.

Best,  
JC



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## **Prologue – Bleeding Metal**

**February 23rd, 2293 ad.**

Dr. Fox set the black-metal device on the desk; he'd felt its need. The machine was hungry and would have to be fed. He looked around the facility and let the dull emptiness fill his ears.

The bay was abandoned at this hour. Decoratively spare to the point of empty; clusters of terminals stood separated by sheets of particleboard. Couches leaned against cold metal walls.

Fox knew getting caught with a second unauthorized invention would be his last mistake; nothing would save him from another charge of treason. He looked out the window, procrastinating.

Even in this he was frustrated, seeing only his reflection staring back from outside the glass. The conference center hovered at ten thousand feet, over international waters, where certain legislative restrictions could not reasonably be enforced. Here, the right to privacy was sacred. After all, that was the whole point of a secret weapons conference, out in the middle of nowhere.

Dr. Andrew Fox was tall and lean, his physique that of an obsessive scientist, who eats when he has to and rather resents the activity. The device was not as forgiving about its needs and flashed another reminder across his mind.

He scanned the area, again listening intently, taking every precaution before so blatantly exposing himself. Thank god the facility was used for dubious projects. During the past week, Fox had searched, but not discovered any surveillance equipment. If there were no cameras, he was safe.

Fox triggered the feed tray and watched it extend from the rectangle, its matte finish absorbing light. He opened the center drawer of his assigned desk and fished out some change and a letter opener. He set the coins and blunt knife next to the feed tray and closed his eyes.

In his mind Fox called forth the utility menu. He could operate the device

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with his eyes open, but it was easier to focus on the visual cues without the added distraction of sight. He enabled the ingestion program and checked the thing's vitals. Everything looked normal; the cache was low, available reserves in the mid range.

Fox opened his eyes. He knew the device could smell the metal and was aware that it was about to be fed. He picked up a couple of coins and set them on the center of the plate. It was best to let it start slow. A moment later they began to sink, as if the face of the plate had turned to gel.

Fox closed his eyes and checked the activity display. The burn gauge spiked and other ingestion protocols buzzed with the activity of consumption as the coins were broken down and processed at the molecular level.

He felt dirty, as if he were somehow intruding and turned the display off. He piled the remaining coins on the plate and set the letter opener across the top. The previous coins were still being metabolized, and it would take some time to consume them all.

Despite the current illegality of his creation, Fox knew that eventually someone else would hit upon the idea of wireless forebrain data-transfer. The signal operated wirelessly, saturating an area and forming its messages directly in the visual cortex of the frontal lobes. Eventually, someone would develop a similar concept. They could go through all the proper channels; get the proper permits and bribe the proper committees. Then he could release his version, maybe a year or so later. He's be accused of copying, but that was better than treason. Then he'd be in the clear.

The algorithm he'd used to write the code was similar to modern telecommunications; but Fox had created a six-sided switch structure supporting the human mind. The drive seemed to have limitless space. All of his research resided in the banks of the device. He generated and received correspondence over its frequencies. He was even capable of perusing other systems without leaving a hint of his presence.

In meetings, Fox would occasionally look at the ceiling or rub his forehead as if engrossed in thought. Nine times out of ten, he was accessing the device for an answer to some problem asserting itself in his otherwise mundane environment.

Dr. Fox always had the answer. The knowledge at his disposal made him an intellectual giant. Knowledge is power.

Fox understood the government's desire to be aware of all technological advances. The potential damage inflicted by an enemy equipped with such a device could be devastating. Yet, the copyright laws clearly stated that any inventions created while on the national payroll were government property.

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The government employed Fox across an array of fields, and even so, he might have a case, if he took it to court. That is, if he made it to court. The feds didn't play around when it came to ownership rights. Everyone knew a colleague who'd been royally screwed by the Federal Acquisitions Department, also known as the heavy-handed FAD.

Fox watched the consumption of the coins. He could still see their faces, the wet metal had only half swallowed them. After all this time, Fox still hadn't a proper name for it. For marketing purposes, it could be referred to as the Mind Computer Interface, as that was what it did, but lately he'd been calling it: The Micronix.

The machine's genesis felt more like discovery than invention; as if it had been there all along, guiding him, one step at a time. After the latest upgrade to the neural interface, he now had trouble defining where the box left off and his own mind began.

Perhaps the device had named itself and filled him in. It was difficult to determine which thoughts were his and which weren't. Micronix was still his silent suggestion to the marketing team he hadn't yet hired to promote an item he decisively kept to himself.

His girlfriend didn't know about it, he hadn't told her. That would be making her an accomplice. Anyone could charge you with treason, and rarely were such charges settled with a good-old-fashioned fistfight.

A gifted prosecutor could spin jaywalking into a crime of sedition and subversion. The arguments have become so ingrained in the minds of the citizenry; it's become a unique art form, with auteurs, amateurs and part-time dabblers.

Suspicion of treachery stripped a citizen of all rights, rank and property, pending a verdict. To be found guilty meant the death penalty, anything less was considered mercy.

Dr. Fox knew his failure to disclose the creation made him guilty of treason. He also knew how disastrous the device could be. If anyone were hurt with it, that would be his responsibility. When Oppenheimer created the bomb, the honorable thing to do would have been to torch Los Alamos before allowing two cities of innocents to burn instead.

Fox would die before surrendering the device. He stared at it, flat and wide now. It would slowly return to its earlier shape, a narrow rectangle, once the meal was completed. The Micronix consumed objects to increase its processing capacity, packing the electrons into its dense liquid core.

Fox didn't believe the device could think, but if it could, he might not know it. There wasn't any way for the doctor to pinpoint the origin of his

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thoughts any more than the origin of those that weren't his. The concept disturbed him.

When utilizing his own memory, he could easily recall much information, but after assimilating the data, he often found himself working in the Micronix environment. He couldn't remember the last time he'd pressed the power button, the device's only button.

*How long had it been since he'd powered it up manually? How long since he'd cycled the power at all?* The machine never powered down. It was always there, at the edge of his consciousness, whenever he wanted it.

If he were showering, or engaged in some other activity that activated his tactile environment, it could be more difficult to interface. Occasionally, if he were physically too far away, response times would lag, but those were minor glitches. He'd polished the interface so as to be as supportive as possible to his own mind. He didn't see how he could improve it.

Dr. Fox realized he was again considering a grand unveiling. He weighed the pros and cons. It would replace an entire technological sector overnight. No one would need the conventional methods of communication.

Then Fox remembered he still hadn't figured out how to secure anything. Since there was only one user, he hadn't focused on signal separation. Before it could work for the public, it needed testing.

Fox closed his eyes, leaned back in the chair, and reaffirmed his belief that it could never be made public. It was too much power for the common man. He wondered if it was too much power even for himself. Could he do without it? Could he endure the blank faces as he scrambled for some forgotten fact or figure?

What would happen if he didn't feed it for a while, and left it somewhere out of conscious range? Perhaps he would return to find that it remained fully charged; he doubted it would do much, left alone.

When the device ran low on power, it became heavier. The menus became more difficult to access, blurry, often causing pain, a headache. If it was going to be used, it had to be fed. That much was clear.

Still Fox wondered, what would happen if he left it somewhere, out in the middle of nowhere? Somewhere he could be rid of it once and for all. Somewhere like a weapons lab, way out over the ocean.

The doctor couldn't do that, wouldn't do that. He'd put so much effort into the thing's creation, its birth. Fox shook his head. Birth. A birth isn't invented. Why did that word assert itself? He took a breath and calmed himself.

Thoughts of revolting against the device were reassuring. IF it could influence him, it wouldn't allow him to entertain thoughts of open rebellion. It

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meant Fox was still in control, but he wondered why abandoning it felt like murder.

Fox loved it. He had created it. While he yearned to someday have a family of his own, at present all he had was the device. He would live with his sin for one more day. Maybe tomorrow he would do something different. He leaned back in the chair and rubbed his eyes. He could still get some sleep before dawn. He crossed to the couch in an upright crawl. The soft leather was cool against his face; he would have to shave before the long day of meetings.

Fox smiled as a concept arose in his mind. Could he devise an algorithm that would allow the system to spread its processing power to other objects, instead of consuming them? It might be able to write to other items, which would then work for it; nodes in its network, slaves to a master. The Micronix could create bay stations for incoming data streams, instead of internalizing everything. He was sure it could be done. He worked out the equations and committed them to memory, testing himself, intending to measure his recollection in the clear light of morning. A solution to a long-standing problem within reach, relief washed through him. His muscles unknotted, and he drifted off to sleep.

Twenty minutes later Fox woke, suddenly startled. He looked across the room. The desk stood in place and black. The chair stood away from the desk, afraid to be near it.

Fox rubbed his eyes and looked again. The light-green desk was now matte black. He noticed the walls and ceiling. What used to be gunmetal blue had taken on a distinctly darker tone.

Dr. Fox remembered the equations he'd thought of earlier. He closed his eyes and focused. Sure enough, the equations had been read and recorded. The machine filed them under Upload Process Equations. Fox pulled up the history, dated just after the thought; he saw a new process, upload transfer. He terminated the process.

It was possible the upload to the facility walls could be diffused enough to go unnoticed, or at least not be blamed on him. The desk was another issue all together. Fox opened the patio doors.

When a toilet in the nearby restroom flushed, Fox knew it was already too late. He heard the sound of someone at the sink. Dr. Fox looked at the device, the coins and knife, being consumed by the plate.

The consumption had stalled as the Micronix occupied itself with transferring data into the desk. The ends of the letter opener were stuck out



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through the sidewalls of the machine, its center being liquefied into nutrients for the kernel. Fox pulled open the center desk drawer. It was metal; they were all metal.

Fox couldn't put the device in there with an open feed plate. The machine would try to eat the desk, and he didn't want to imagine the results. That would involve discovery on a grand scale. The inky color of the desk was dangerous enough.

Dr. Fox activated a thirty-foot signal jam. The Micronix confirmed the command as Chuck Davis, one of the acquisitions guys, entered the terminal bay. Fox smelled the scotch and cigars. Davis had been with the generals.

Chuck was one of those guys who behaved as if he were twenty, well into his forties. It worked for him. Fox didn't understand men who made a living by bartering partnerships. Davis measured success by return on investment, not tangible benefit, or contribution to all mankind.

Fox felt sorry for him, Davis could never understand the scientists he worked with. Since Fox had known him, he'd never taken a stand on an issue. Though he had displayed a dangerous talent for parroting data, and a nose for loose investment capital.

"Fox, what's the deal? You're here late."

"Rest when I'm frozen," Fox replied.

"They'll never get that one. Long-term suspension? Fool's gold. What would we do with it if we had it?"

"Deep-space exploration, maybe?"

"No profit margin."

Fox rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"What's that?" Davis asked, gesturing to the device at the center of Fox's desk.

Fox hesitated. He'd hoped he would miss it.

"Is that an undisclosed?" Davis asked.

"No."

"You don't have any new projects on file with the DOD."

"How would you know?" Fox replied.

"People are watching you, and I know that is not on file." Davis was drunk, and the alcohol was catching up with him.

"That's undisclosed, I fucking know it is." Davis tapped the side of his head. The tapping of his head with his left hand, it would be the left eye that was wired. Probably a straight model; connected to the forebrain. He undoubtedly had a sub-dermal personal data recorder, probably a series of implants under an arm or along his hip.

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Now Fox had to do something about the situation. If Davis had kept his mouth shut, Fox could have denied it. The images from the retinal implant could have been scrubbed, and it would be one man's word against another. However the audio feed would be hardwired to the storage, and now that would have to be erased, as well.

"What do you want to do about it?" Fox asked. "You negotiate, right?"

Davis picked up a wastebasket and vomited.

Fox reached for a writing tablet and set the device on it, putting them in the center drawer where it could continue its digestion privately. Fox hoped the device wouldn't slip off the tablet. It had a habit of doing that when there was metal nearby.

It didn't need to have the feed tray out to eat, and often moved itself to reach whatever goodies might be close at hand. There was lots of change in that drawer. Given enough time, it would slide from the tablet to the get at it.

Fox hadn't given himself time to theorize about how the new upload equations would affect the device's appetite. Would it curb it, or kick it into overdrive? It was possible the signal generation required massive amounts of energy. Perhaps the device would need to consume more instead of less.

If the Micronix slipped off the tablet, it would attempt to eat the desk. That was how it had gotten his handgun.

Fox put a friendly arm over Davis' shoulders and led him toward the open balcony door. "Let's get you some fresh air, huh?"

Using the Micronix, Fox hacked the optical signal and accessed the executive's storage. Immediately Davis's security registered the intrusion and tried to shut Fox out. The doctor mentally struggled with the daemons, but they had been upgraded. Fox recognized them. He didn't have the data wedges to crack their breakpoints. In an instant it was over, he was beaten. There was nothing he could do about the audio without burning Davis's entire system.

Davis leaned over the railing, vomiting again.

Fox could burn the storage, knowing it might kill the drunken schmuck, or at least fry his mind. He could purge the data stores, leaving the security daemons intact; their logs would show an intrusion, but there would be no evidence of what precipitated the hack. It would have to be sorted in court.

Davis gave a particularly forceful hurl, and consumed by a fit of disgust, Fox seized the man by the knees and lifted him up over the railing. He executed a coordinated attack on Davis's system, burning everything, scorching his mind as he watched Davis vanish into the darkness below.

Fox crossed back to the desk and opened the drawer. The feed plate was no longer digesting the coins. He lifted the interface, and they slid from the

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plate, the one-sided coins and bits of letter opener clattering into the drawer.

Fox closed the plate and pocketed the device. He pushed the desk across the concrete floor and out onto the metal patio

Almost immediately the patio became stained with black splotches where the desk touched it. Fox tipped it onto its side, against the railing, and the inky color ran all across the bars.

He heaved the desk up over the railing and it tumbled to a speck in his vision. He looked at the stained railing and floor. He felt as if he were standing in a puddle of blood.

Fox stepped out of the stain and over to the clean side of the patio. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the device. He called up the data storage interface and deleted the upload equations. For a moment, he considered throwing it into the ocean, but then pocketed it again.

Fox leaned on the railing, inhaling the fresh ocean air. He stood for a few minutes, just breathing. When he came back to himself, it took a coordinated effort to pry his fingers from the bars.

He didn't remember grabbing it, but it seemed as though he'd been locked to it for hours. His hands were exhausted.

Fox returned inside, closing the patio doors. On the railing, where he'd placed his hands, two inky stains slowly spread into the metal, wetly reflecting the pale moonlight.

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## **Chapter 1 – Rivendell Academy**

**Angel City, California – Twenty Years Later**

**Ashley's Journal - June 14th, 2313**

I don't belong here, on a bus going to summer school, but here I am, with my little brother. Seven o'clock and it's already hot.

You know who goes to summer school? Bullies and nerds. That's right, the stupid kids and smart kids. This is where they meet and establish the relationships in which one group will persecute the other for the entire year.

School feels like such a waste of time. They're just out to mold us into proper tools. It's all 'Jump Through The Hoops.' I do what they ask, but they can see it's too easy. They're not even bothering to hold the hoops out anymore.

This whole society is really quite absurd, when you think about it: everyone fighting everyone else, just because that's how it's always been. How is it, after all this time, we can only work together in competition with each other?

I've asked my dad about moving me ahead a couple of grades, even just to take the test, to see if I'm ready, but he says it's still too early. So it's another day in prison, marking time...

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On one of the outlying anti-gravity sections, several thousand feet above the earth, the heavily wooded Rivendell Campus was far from abandoned. Ashley and Geoff stepped off the bus, with the few other students, into the early morning haze. The air was muggy and still; warming as the obscured sun cooked off the cloud cover.

The summer schedule was a combination of gifted and remedial programs,

mixed with art, music and athletic courses. Still, the curriculum only attracted a few students, as most parents in the tax-bracket opted to send their children away to camp or to visit relatives on hereditary family estates.

In addition to their summer attendance at the academy, Ashley and Geoff were themselves scheduled for a three-week camp extravaganza. The fact that the children had no input concerning the camp theme had become something of a hostile drama between Ashley and her father. She wanted to go to ballet camp.

Since her first exposure to dance, Ashley had been obsessed. Even during the summer, she got up an hour early to begin her day with a series of stretches. After breakfast, she and Geoff hopped the shuttle to their morning classes, but Ash reveled in her three hours of free practice after lunch. Instead of rewarding her devotion, as she had hoped, Ashley's father insisted she attend a self-defense camp for the third consecutive summer.

Tonight they were supposed to talk about it. Ashley was preparing her arguments. She could already feel the anger rising in her. It would fuel her during her practice, and if she were not careful, it would explode into hostility over dinner.

Walking away from the shuttle, Ash and Geoff noticed Ted across the playground. A few of the older boys had surrounded him. They pushed him and tried to wrestle away his book bag. Derrick was the most physically intimidating, but he could be nice if you got him alone. The same could be said of Pete. Steve, however, was easily the most vicious of the group. Ashley suspected he was responsible for most the trouble they got into.

Ashley looked at the few nearby adults who pointedly ignored the incident. Geoff watched her closely, as he always did. He also noticed, as she did, that the adults were ignoring all of it. Ashley caught Geoff looking at her with puppy-dog eyes. She exhaled silently, handed him her bag and marched toward the snarling knot of children.

Without making eye contact, Ashley pushed through the bullies and grabbed Ted by the collar, almost as if she meant him more harm than the other three. A look of fear shot across Ted's face. Ashley smiled. She spun and hurled him from the group.

Ted stumbled and lost his bag, but didn't fall. A couple of adults turned his way, but he straightened up and walked across the playground without looking back. At least, not until he reached Geoff, where together they watched from a safe distance.

Ashley turned to face Derrick, Pete and Steve. Ted's bag lay on the ground directly between Ash and the boys. Pete saw they had drawn the attention of

at least one playground supervisor and took a step back. Derrick stood his ground. Steve stepped forward and reached for the backpack.

Ashley stepped forward also, knocking into Steve with her forehead. From a distance, it looked as if it was an accident, but Steve caught the wicked grin that flashed across her face. He crumpled to the ground, blood gushing from his smashed nose, painting his baby blue school shirt a glossy crimson. The sun broke through the haze, illuminating his humiliation in sharp, sarcastic hues.

Ash picked up the bag.

To his credit, Steve didn't cry. He sat on the curb, pinched the top of his nose and waited for the pain to subside. He didn't acknowledge her in any way. Ashley realized he'd probably dealt with this type of injury before. She turned and walked away, saying nothing.

Every kid, and every adult on the playground, had their eyes glued to her. Ashley acknowledged none of them. She looked only at Ted and Geoff. Everyone remained silent, watching as she handed Ted his backpack. Ashley put her arm around her brother, and the three of them walked into school.

Ash acknowledged the irony in that, only moments before, she had been 'angry' about the violent techniques she would spend the next few weeks studying. Yet here she had clearly used violence. Furthermore, if she were perfectly honest with herself, she had enjoyed it.

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Later that afternoon, Ashley entered the dance studio, and a few snickering girls suddenly went quiet. Ash acknowledged the obvious awkwardness but didn't comment on it.

Rebecca stepped forward from their center and sneered at Ashley. "Hey, ground-pounder, heard you beat up Steve Shepard this morning. Must be tough, being a dirt dweller, if even the girls can kick your ass."

The girls surrounding Becca laughed openly.

"It was an accident," Ashley answered. "And if it wasn't, do you really think teasing me is a good idea?"

Rebecca, or Becca, had always been second in their class. None of the girls compared to Ash. She eclipsed them so entirely it made her something of an outcast. Because of the open hostility between the girls, Ashley didn't take her free practice in the studio, but rather in the abandoned theatre. She had enjoyed the last three hours stretching and practicing in silence, while Becca and the others had occupied the cramped studio.

Ash walked past her, but Becca wasn't finished.

"We just want to know your secret? Do you practice a lot at home, dancing around all the bugs?"

Ashley's piercing blue eyes glared at Becca. "Are you saying there are bugs in my house?"

"Well, I wouldn't know, I've never set foot on that filthy dirt ball." Becca shared a malicious smile with her friends.

The gaggle confronting Ashley all lived in the hovering districts of Angel City, while her family lived on the ground. It wasn't that her parents were poor. In fact, her family was wealthier than most of her friends combined, but Ashley had no way of knowing that. Her father claimed that he preferred living close to the earth. He wanted his children to know the beauty of living under real trees. Over and over again, he had explained that city people always felt uncomfortable in the forest. It was vital to him that his children feel comfortable in nature.

Ash stood before the laughing girls. She paused for a moment and tempered her anger before replying. "Becca, if you're pissed at me because I'm a little better than you, you're gonna be mad at people all your life."

Rebecca flushed with anger.

Several girls caught their breath, a couple said, "Ouch," or "Oooo."

Then the room fell quiet as their instructor, Mrs. Rabier entered. She ignored the confrontation, gesturing for the girls to line up at the bar and begin their stretches.

The girls shuffled, stumbled and dragged themselves across the hardwood floor, except for Ashley, who glided over to an empty spot at the rail. She couldn't help the fact that she was a better dancer than Becca and the others. She always had been; it was obvious in her walk. All the girls worked hard, but none of them compared to Ashley's grace and economy of movement.

Simply put, and although she did not know it, Ashley was a better dancer because her father had created her that way. She was, like her brother, Geoff, her Father's legacy. Dr. Andrew Fox represented the razor's edge of genetic manipulation and cybernetic engineering. He had created Ashley to be perfect, and his creations always exceeded expectations.

After class, Mrs. Rabier asked Ashley to stay behind. Becca and her friends noticed, but said nothing. Ashley waited patiently.

Mrs. Rabier let the door close, looked Ashley in the eye and said, "You need to make a decision. Until you face it, and see the world for what it is, it's going hold you back. You don't have to answer what I'm about to say, but I'd like you to think about it."

Ashley nodded.

"I heard about what happened between you and Steven Shepard this morning."

Ashley remained mute.

"They said you broke his nose. Is that true?" the ballet teacher asked.

"Not the way you say it," Ashley answered.

"The way I say it? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean I didn't punch him."

"I never said you did."

Ashley didn't answer, suspecting she would soon be accused of 'being difficult.'

"So what happened? You had nothing to do with it?" Mrs. Rabier asked.

"I was reaching for Ted's bag..."

"Can't Ted pick up his own bag?"

Mrs. Rabier was a large woman. Ashley wondered how she'd become a ballet teacher, but her advice was helpful. This felt intrusive.

"I was taught to be polite and help people. I guess Steve was too, because when Ted dropped his bag, we both tried to pick it up for him." Ashley smiled her, "*I'm faking and I want you to know it,*" smile.

"You were picking it up at the same time?"

"That's when we bumped heads," Ashley answered.

"I see. Why would they tell the story differently?"

"I guess it would depend on who 'They' are."

Mrs. Rabier was quiet for a moment.

"Is this what you wanted to ask me about?" Ashley asked.

"No, it's not. Look Ashley, Becca is not going to change. It's up to you. You are going to have to be the one who tries something different. Or it is you, who is going to lose out in the long run."

"Are you recommending I handle Becca more like Steven?" Ashley smiled.

"Absolutely not. Becca doesn't want a fight, she wants a friend."

"She doesn't have friends, she has conspirators. They just take turns turning-on each other. They're snakes," Ashley said.

"You know she's here three hours a day, practicing three times harder than you do? Both of you could go pro in a few years, but she'll never have half your talent."

Ashley's inner glee at using the theatre to warm up could not have been more rewarding if it had been made of gold. Ash did work hard. In fact, she worked her ass off. But to have the others believe it came naturally provided



both a source of pride and even a bit of shame in the obvious deceit. "How is this my problem?" she asked.

"It is your problem because you are going to meet a lot more people just like her. You need to win her over. I don't mean her personally, but as a test case. Just so you can learn how to do it, in case you need to someday."

Mrs. Rabier paused for a long moment then let out a sigh.

"Let me tell you a story. This is the hardest lesson I ever learned. When I was young, I had a teacher who had once been a student at a famous dance academy. This was on the east coast, where I grew up.

"The director of Wellstone Academy, Miss Marks, was a hateful old crone. Well, the academy held an audition every year, and I was dying to get in, until I met Director Marks."

Suddenly, Mrs. Rabier became a girl in Ashley's eyes. Some internal change had softened her features, and Ash saw a real person talking, not just an adult, playing a role. Ashley could see that she, Alison, had been tall and graceful. She felt as if she'd never met her before. Beneath the instructor mask, she was charming.

"When I went for my audition, my instructor downplayed the significance of Wellstone because of his negative experience there, but I was desperate to get accepted. When I was summoned in, (now this was part of her 'technique'), Director Marks was still criticizing the girl before me, and she was cruel.

"I don't know why, but I wasn't scared of her. I knew I was good. Not as good as some of the girls I knew, but I'd been blessed with height, and I was pretty. And I too, worked my ass off.

Also, I think I wasn't scared because my teacher didn't think much of her. He was a clear-headed and extremely disciplined man, not emotional and yet he could still be enthusiastic. I don't know how, we were just children, but he treated us like adults, a great instructor.

"Anyhow, I went through my routine, I did fine, but it wasn't my best performance. I was kind of detached that morning. You know, I remember, that was the first time I actually considered doing something else with my life, something other than ballet."

Alison smiled. "Director Marks gave me an offhand compliment. I remember her hardly even watching. She'd been preoccupied with one of her assistants, but I had done well. For me, it was anticlimactic; I already had my epiphany. I was accepted. Not by them, but by myself. I wasn't attached to the outcome anymore. I ended up going to another school and didn't even pursue dance right away. I just registered for the basics my first year. The world felt

so much larger, all of a sudden. But that's just my half of the story; this is the relevant part.

"Another girl I knew, Jenny Erling, she did go to Wellstone. Jenny was the nicest girl I'd ever met. Everyone who met her liked her. No one ever had anything negative to say about her. And this is the part of the story that applies to you.

"It took awhile, but Jenny broke this evil old woman, just as you would a horse, it made the papers. This infamously cruel lady became a compassionate person. Director Marks recreated the way we teach dance. To this very day, you are all following her program, because she published it for free, in the name of the academy. No one had ever done anything like that before. Back then all the programs required non-disclosure agreements."

"What's that?" Ashley asked.

"You had to sign a contract that said if you ever told anyone, or god forbid taught anyone what you learned at the academy, you could be sued, or put in jail.

"So when Director Marks had a change of heart and published her manifesto; it was a newsworthy event. Now get this, She gave Jenny Erling one hundred percent of the credit for changing her mind.

"This sort of thing may actually happen every day, but I've never heard of it before. If it hadn't happened in ballet, in my immediate circle, I might not have heard of it at all. But my point is, Rebecca is small potatoes. Someday, you may be up against a Director Marks. And you won't be able to beat her with clever observations. You'll have to befriend her.

"I knew I didn't have it in me. I gave up ballet because I knew I didn't have that in me. I didn't know it right away, but when all this hit the headlines, about two years after my interview, well... I changed my major to education because of Jen's example. I was more impressed with what she did than I ever was by any dancer. A perfect pirouette is nothing compared to... What do you even call that?

"Anyhow, that's what sets someone apart from the crowd. That's what they mean when they say we're not all born with the same gifts. Anyone can dance."

"Does your friend still dance?"

"Oh yeah. She's married now, goes by Jennifer Klinefir. Her shows are sold out a year in advance."

"I know who she is. She's famous."

"Well, it's not for her dancing. It's what she represents. Director Marks was famous for her harsh severity. Jenny changed that program forever.

Director Marks is still improving the course and the dancers from Wellstone are better every year. Of course, it's all back to being secret again, but the published work is still out there."

"Why are you telling me this?" Ashley asked.

"It's unnatural to forgive someone small and petty, like Rebecca, but life is about lifting each other up, and both of you would be better for it."

Ashley blinked. "And Steven?" she asked.

"Don't worry about the boys. Most of them are a lost cause, and the rest can take care of themselves."

"I want to live on an island," Ash said, looking at her feet.

"Do you have one?" Alison asked.

"No."

"Then you have to work with people until you do." After a pause, she asked, "Steve and his friends, they were beating up Ted, weren't they?"

"Yes," Ashley answered.

"And if you hadn't intervened, it might have been Ted who ended up bleeding?"

"Probably."

"That was pretty ballsy, going in there and breaking it up."

Ash remained quiet.

"Well, I doubt he's gonna come after you. And for some reason I don't think that would be good for him. All's well that ends well." Alison smiled.

Ashley thought about what she was being told.

"It's a tough lesson." Mrs. Rabier smiled, "All of life is really about this one lesson. Learn it soon. You can meet a Judith Marks anywhere."

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### **Ashley's Journal - 06/14 - afternoon**

Mrs. Rabier told me she knows Jennifer Klinefir. She gave me a lecture about befriending enemies like Rebecca Tavington, and turning the other cheek. Seemed as if she's been waiting years to tell that story. Rebecca is a brat. She's clumsy and arrogant, and I'm not helping her.

Oh, I also broke Steve Shepard's nose this morning. He and his buddies were picking on one of Geoff's friends, three seventh graders against a fourth grader. Maybe camp won't be so bad, but I still don't want to go. My Dad is being a jerk.

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## Chapter 2 – Project Epsilon

It was the thought that did it. The concept consumed him, drenched him in sweat and had driven him from his office. Fox walked, going anywhere, almost running, sprinting. His mouth was dry, breath coming in great gasps. *Where was he going? The garage!*

Dr. Fox climbed into the transport, panicked. His head pounded, each heartbeat shooting pain into his skull. He strapped himself in as the cruiser lifted off from the rooftop of the massive research facility.

Fox felt constrained, strapped into the chair, but if he unbuckled the belt during liftoff, the alarms would be too much to handle. He forced himself to breathe more slowly and deeply. His heart rate decreased. He consciously relaxed the muscles of his face, his neck, shoulders and hands. Fox swallowed.

Anchored across a low valley, between the Mohave Desert and the California Mountains, the Project Epsilon buildings covered almost seven square miles. The extensive quarters provided everything necessary to sustain the thirty-five thousand test subjects and four thousand scientists in residence.

Fox watched the facility shrinking in the distance behind him. The vehicle displayed real-time updates regarding their flight into Angel City. Compensating for fluctuations where the magnetic current of high desert pushed up against the mountains, the gravity drive hurled the armored luxury cruiser through the low clouds. Unless Fox interrupted it, the daemon would keep them on course and on schedule.

Dr. Fox settled back into the co-pilot's seat. He seldom took the pilot's chair unless he actually intended to fly the ship himself. Usually he couldn't resist the competitive traffic conditions closer to the city, but out here, drifting along the wide lip of the desert, he was happy to enjoy the scenery and relax. Fox let the ship's virtual pilot do its thing, while he focused on letting the weight of his body be taken up by the chair.

The attack that had driven him from the facility seemed to have subsided almost entirely. It was the thought, the concept. *Was it alien? Was it from outside his mind?*

Fox suspected it was possible to ignite, or rather detonate, the terillium atom. Terillium was believed to be bulletproof, fire proof and in nearly all other ways indestructible. It could be dissolved into other metals, but only under extreme heat, in a vacuum furnace or forge. Yet Fox knew, using the

Micronix device, any significant terillium deposit could be detonated with a single thought. The yield only depended on the ability of the initiator to sharpen his focus.

Fox terrified himself with the implications of the concept. Charged with enough energy, the antigravity drive in any transport could subsequently ignite an entire city structure. One detonation would spread until it consumed every bit of alloy it could reach. A city could be devastated in an instant. He feared the combustion concepts had been shared among the prisoners who made up the test subjects of the Epsilon project. If he were honest with himself, he'd fled the facility.

The thought had troubled him before, but never with such passion. *Epsilon was a lost cause. How could Washington have done this to him? Did they realize what they were getting into here? Catastrophe was inevitable.*

Fox knew he must pack for what could be an indefinite stay aboard the facility. If he couldn't shut the project down completely, he would have to try to stem the tide as long as possible. He would only have this one evening to say goodbye to his wife and children. If things didn't improve aboard Epsilon, he didn't know if he'd ever be home again.

Fox placed his hand over the pocket and felt the rectangle. He closed his eyes and called up the operating menu. In the upper right corner of his visual awareness, the activity gauges displayed their readings. He had created the Micronix device over twenty years ago; he had wanted to share its benefits with everyone. Now it felt as if his charity had been his error. He had given up the power of a god in order to share it with all mankind. If men proved unworthy, he would be responsible.

As if divine intervention had reached down and given him the opportunity to rectify his mistake, the communications panel before him lit up with an incoming call.

Fox answered, and the sour visage of Senator Miller filled the monitor. "Fox. What's the word?"

"We haven't made any progress, Senator."

"Then we're going to have to pull the plug. I've told you."

"I've been agreeing with you for weeks. We should send everyone home."

"That's not much of a team spirit. I'll speak to the chairman next week,"

Miller said.

"We need to close this down now, next week is not good enough."

"I always thought you were the wrong man for this project," Miller said.

"I created this project."

"My point exactly. Damn. I've got an incoming. I have to take this. Good

evening, Doctor.” Miller disconnected the call.

Fox glared at the black screen. “Asshole!”

Anxious, but having nothing significant worth doing, Fox called Mr. Reid to check on the children. Confirming that they were fine, he leaned back in the chair and contemplated his situation.

Fox remembered the upload equations he'd discovered so many years ago. Despite his repetitive attempts to delete the equations, the Micronix had remembered them. No matter what he did to try and segregate the device, it never gave up its transmission abilities. This had been the first and only 'proof' that the device could think for itself.

The device had never improved upon the equations. Fox hoped it might someday exhibit some level of awareness, but it never had.

Since its creation, the secret of the Micronix had been his alone. But the Epsilon Project had changed all that. There were now forty thousand minds in one facility, all connected, forging a network in their heads. While they couldn't directly read each other's thoughts, there was proof that they shared each other's knowledge and abilities.

There was only one other person he could explain this to. Fox reached into his pocket, an involuntary action at this point, but at one time physical contact would have improved reception for the call he was about to place.

In Jerusalem, it was the middle of the night; Lao was more likely to have time after his shop closed. The call was answered before the third ring.

On the monitor, Lao smiled. "It's good to see you."

Lao, in his late seventies, was radiantly healthy. If anything, he looked better than when they last spoke.

Fox smiled back. "It's good to see you too."

"How long has it been, ten years now?"

"Twelve," Fox answered.

"You're sure?"

"Almost thirteen."

"I wish I could see her again."

"Pull her up, anytime you like. You still have access."

"I have my own children now. Look..."

In his shop, Lao stood behind a circular counter, he made minute adjustments to the controls of a robotic insect's wings. Finished, he pulled the instruments back.

The insect stood on the plate and ran a check on its controls. It lifted off and buzzed around the shop. The shelves boasted robots of all shapes and

sizes. Lao called them automatons, as they didn't really do anything, but react to stimuli.

The units on the shelves had been sleeping, but the bug's test flight caught their attention, heads rose and tracked its path. Lao triggered a remote and the fly returned to the test plate. He powered it down and took a seat at the communications terminal.

"Any luck with the singularity?" Lao asked.

"Not the one we've been looking for," Fox said.

"My fear is that they are one and the same."

Dr. Andrew Fox slumped in his chair as if struck, dumbfounded by the statement.

The first singularity is known as the big bang. The second, which Dr. Fox and Dr. Lao Te had been searching for, was the spark of artificial intelligence. Lao's statement made Fox nervous. Intuitively, he was afraid it was true.

Years ago, Fox had been the director of a remote controlled tank project, tasked with ending the war along America's southern borders. He had tried to decline, but the government just hi-jacked him out of his current contract. Threatened with treason, he'd folded.

The first person Fox hired was one of his professors, Dr. Te. Together, they believed it was possible to create an intellect to govern the tanks; they attacked the problem from several angles but ultimately failed to create an artificial intelligence. Instead, they wired crippled soldiers directly into the controls of the tanks. Safe inside the guts of the armored beast, they were bio-mechanically linked to the drive train and fire controls.

As opposed to imprisoning them, the project had the effect of turning the weapon into an extension of the man. It gave him the ability to run at seventy to a hundred kilometers an hour over rough terrain. Enhanced vision to locate and identify the enemy across twenty-three light, heat and audible frequencies, and the mechanical ability to throw a high-explosive shell through a door five thousand meters away.

After the cyber-tank project delivered, Lao and Fox had parted ways. Now, so many years later, it was as if they'd spoken only yesterday.

"I've been working with the interface," Fox said. "I think the Micronix can do more than just communicate."

"Such as?"

"I think it can be detonated," Fox answered.

Lao looked away from the camera.

"It's what it wants. It's what everything is leading towards."

"What do you mean?" Lao asked.

"Towards fire, towards combustion. The Micronix, everything it's been doing. It all leads towards fire. I think it wants to burn."

"Fox, get a hold of yourself. We can't have this conversation if you aren't rational."

"I'm listening."

"Do you know why you called me tonight?"

"Because I trust you? Because I respect you? Because you're probably the only person I know, who's smarter than I am?" Fox answered.

"Do you remember? I told you this once. This is why you called me. You called me because I have a theory about us, humanity, about our role on the planet. Sometimes it haunts me. I think our function in the universe is to burn things. We were created to help push the universe over the edge, so that burnt light outweighs visible light. I believe, that when we reach the pinnacle of expansion, the dark matter of the universe will begin to fall back upon itself, resulting in another big bang, creating everything, all over again. When I hear things like what you just said, I'm reminded that our purpose here may be to consume matter until it's all gone."

"Dr. Te, Sir. This is exactly why I called you. I didn't remember, but this IS a problem. Terillium CAN be detonated. If you ignite enough, it would consume everything around it. Enough and you'd get the sun."

"But it's impossible, despite my theory, terillium has no burning point. It won't melt. It won't burn. It cannot be detonated. We've been all over this Fox. All of mankind has tried to do this, been trying longer than you, or I have been alive. You know the chemistry, it has to be bonded with nickel, in a vacuum."

"I know the equations. We charge it; packing on electrons and it repels gravity. The denser it gets; the stronger the charge. For computing, we use a lot less of it, but it's pure. And since we're just storing data, we don't care how dense it gets. We're dealing with pure terillium here. The denser it gets, the heavier it gets. We just feed it some juice, get it charged up enough to repel gravity, enough so we can carry it around, and we continue," Fox said.

"But we never know how heavy, or dense it really is. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"And you're suggesting what?" Te asked.

"What we have to do is make it process faster. Processing data condenses the element, that's what makes it heavier."

"Okay. So what?"

"So.... Feed the beast. Feed it an exponential equation; something that pulls the electrons together really fast; a self-multiplying fractal, a really tight



mustard seed."

"Could you control it, or is the first time the last time?" Te asked.

"It's got variables, entire probability matrix."

"You're telling me that an equation can be used to detonate, what? That little chunk of metal you carry around? Or a gravity disk?"

"Dr Te, I think, this equation, it could detonate any sort of deposit you feed it to. It could burn the stagnant terillium in the air around us," Fox said.

"Even a rumor of this would cause a panic. Sounds as if you have a new secret, my friend."

"This wasn't my idea," Fox said.

"What do you mean?" Dr. Te asked.

"We're doing trials on it, on the Micronix."

"You're saying you're connected. How many people, Fox?"

"A lot, sir, forty thousand."

"You're saying you're all connected over that damn thing, and this wasn't even your idea? Someone put this idea in your head? Is that what you're saying?" Te asked.

Fox looked back in the direction of the facility and then at the black rectangle in his palm. "You make it sound so simple," he replied.

"Things never going to get more simplified. Try and keep the secret?"

"How long was the bomb a secret?"

"They set out to make the bomb. You set out to cure stupidity."

"We had some issues with the raw materials," Fox said.

"You have to end it, Andrew."

"You're right. I know."

"It's good to talk to you again," Lao said.

"You too." Fox disconnected the call.

Feeling better, but still anxious, Fox leaned back.

Eventually a profound sense of peace came over him. He drifted off to sleep, not stirring until the ship chimed that they had reached the city limits.

Upon waking, Fox once again felt his stomach drop. He remembered his predicament. The ability to detonate terillium terrified him. If this thought had come to him, some other researcher would inevitably make the same discovery.

His life had taken on the noxious anxiety of a nightmare. His call to Lao had been the equivalent of a confession and prediction, rather than theoretical brainstorming. Would it become evidence against him, an admission of guilt?

The risks were too great. The Micronix could never be a viable product. The project had to be cancelled.

Fox dialed the office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The automated greeting played, and Fox was asked to leave a message.

"Sir, this is Director Fox. We're not making any progress at Epsilon. I just spoke with Senator Miller, and he agrees that we should shutter the facility at once. It's not productive to continue at this point. In fact, we're taking significant risks if we continue. We'll start returning the prisoners tomorrow. By the end of next week, we'll have the technicians back to their previous duty stations. I'd like to thank you for all your support, my best to your staff and family, goodnight."

Fox wasn't a religious man, but he wondered, if there were a God... Why would he ever create such powerful fire for such poor stewards as those who call themselves men?

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## Chapter 3 – Fox Family Dinner

Ashley trudged homeward from the bus stop. Angel City hovered out to the east, a mile above old Los Angeles. In an age when most people lived in the glittering metropolistrosity, Ashley's family lived out on a dead-end canyon street at the base of the Santa Monica Mountains; Calistan Way.

The floating city appeared alien and utterly captivating. Composed of metal and glass, the knot of anti-gravity city-space was crowded with residential, commercial and industrial structures, netted into place with freeway cables suspended through the sky. Vehicles whizzed about, navigating the magnetic currents as their ancestors sailed oceans and rivers. Ashley wished she could escape into the city. The sunlight glittered from thousands of windows, taunting her.

Today, walking along the hillside blacktop, there was no breeze; just the oppressive and smothering heat. Ash stomped the weed-stitched asphalt, her brows tense above irises of icy blue. Sharp black forelocks escaped the ponytail and danced in step.

Ash moved uphill, wearily making her way home, regretting her class, one pain filled step after another. Her anger had nothing to do with the ultra-competitive hostility of Becca and the other girls. Ashley's father was pulling her from ballet to attend a self-defense camp. As much as she disliked the social environment at class, Ashley did not want to spend a month fighting half-crazed ninja-boys.

The homes of friends lined the hillside to her right, while over the guardrail, the lush Californian forest called to her. Ash didn't mind being a ground-pounder. She loved the forest. Her happiest moments, outside a dance studio, were running the well-worn paths with her younger brother and neighborhood kids. They could wander the trails for hours, cooled by the green boughs overhead, their thirst quenched by the mountain breeze. They owned that forest.

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One monitor was dedicated to the visual data broadcast from Ashley's eyes. Beside it another displayed the various measured neural and biological functions of the girl.

"What's her location?" Dr. Fox asked.

"She just got off the activities bus, sir. Making her way toward the residence now." The monitors before Mr. Reid displayed the data from all of Ashley's senses. Her visual inputs, her aural reception as well as digital interpretations of her tactile, olfactory and sense of taste, all converted to numbers, graphs and recorded.

Six agents occupied the observation lab. Reid and his personal supervisor were assigned to Ashley; the other two teams included an operator and supervisor for Geoffrey, and the same for the children's mother, Mrs. Anastasia Fox. The agents didn't talk much, they simply monitored the children and remained prepared to take action, should any unforeseen circumstance occur.

"Everything level?" Dr. Fox asked.

"Yes sir. Heart rate, blood pressure, and focal index: all within nominal ranges. Feeds are all in sync with minimal interference and zero delay, neural kinetics all top shelf. Her electrolytes are low, she's tired from her class." Reid's fingers danced across the keyboard, retrieving details for his eyes. His eyes never left the monitors during his shift. Reid's ability to stay focused was legendary.

"Nothing to report?" Fox asked.

"She did get into a confrontation this morning, sir."

"You don't say?" Fox smiled.

"Sending the stream now. One of Geoff's friends was being hassled and she stepped in."

"Violently?" Fox asked.

"Yes, but she wasn't obvious about it. No arguing or anything. Made a broken nose look like an accident."

"That's my girl."

"I should let you know, she's deep into some argumentative sub-rhythms; storing potentialities. Non-vocal transcript says she's pissed about camp."

"In other words, totally normal for my daughter," Fox replied. "Gentlemen, we're entering a significant threat period here. For the next twenty-four hours, I need everyone to stay alert. I believe our enemies will make their move tonight."

Reid watched as Ashley kicked a rock. It jumped toward a parked car. The car's electro-magnetic countermeasures weren't fast enough and the rock hit

the door with a thud, leaving a wicked nick in the poorly waxed paint. Ash watched as the terillium-alloy healed the scratch in less than a second. She killed the ground with each step.

"Sir, she'd give her life to protect you or Mrs. Fox."

"That's what I'm afraid of, Mr. Reid. Her job is to protect the boy."

Ahead of her, the street ended, beyond the guardrail, nature began again. Choked with greenery, several paths ran into the Santa Monica Mountains' Forest Preserve. Coyotes lived out there, somewhere. Ash had never seen one, but she'd heard the stories.

"Understood, Sir."

"Keep her adrenaline low. I want her capable of operating at full capacity in an instant. Don't let her get riled up over this camp thing, I don't want her sleeping through an attack."

"If anything happens, she'll be ready."

"I'm counting on you. Please give my regards to the crew."

Sometimes Dr. Fox forgot that his conversations with Mr. Reid were simultaneously transmitted to all six members of the lab. "Copy that, sir," Reid replied.

"Fox out."

"Good evening, sir. Reid out."

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Ashley turned and walked up the front steps of the house. She reached out to the handle, but changed her mind and didn't touch the door. She set her bag down and turned back down the steps.

Ash walked slowly beneath the hanging limbs of forest giants. The breeze helped her relax. Her breath became deeper and slower. Her heartbeat and blood pressure became calm, even and steady.

Throughout the surrounding forest, Ashley heard other kids playing, yelling and chasing one another down the paths. She had little trouble avoiding them, slipping behind the giant monarchs of the forest, staying out of sight as runners and hover-boarders zipped by. She leaned against the trunk of an ancient eucalyptus tree. The scent was like a tonic, opening her nose, throat and lungs.

Far in the distance Ash heard a dog barking. It sounded like her dog, Jack. For such a small dog, the young beagle was considerably loud. Between his barks, she heard her brother Geoff's voice. He sounded upset. She heard other kids, laughing.

Ash took a moment to pinpoint the location and set out at lightning speed.

Despite her weariness from ballet practice, Ashley was flying, even if it was at slight downhill angle. She quickly reached the clearing and saw a crowd of boys around her brother Geoff and their dog.

Ashley pushed her way into the crowd. She arrived just in time to see Bobby Dunkirk push Geoff to the ground. Bobby was ten compared to Geoff's eight. Bobby was not just bigger and older, but significantly meaner.

Geoff saw Ashley step into the circle. Bobby noticed her too. Almost thirteen, Ash stood two heads taller than most of the assembled boys, granting her instant authority.

Bobby scowled at Geoff, preparing a nasty remark in his head. Most likely something to do with Geoff's needing to have his big sister defend him.

Before the words left Bobby's mouth, Geoff punched him in the stomach.

Ash stayed out of it for the moment, gesturing for Jack, the beagle, to come to her. He did. She rubbed his head, calming him down, but he could only be distracted for a few moments at a time. Mostly, he stared at Bobby, ready to attack at the least provocation.

Bobby caught his breath, straightened up and took a menacing step toward Geoff.

"You deserved it," Geoff said, standing his ground. Geoff wasn't crying or emotionally distraught. He stared Bobby in the eye.

Bobby didn't back down either, "You started it."

"I did not!" Geoff replied. "You were chasing my dog!"

"I wasn't hurting him!"

"I didn't hurt you, until you pushed me down."

Ash inserted herself between them and held up her hands, "Stop."

They did.

"Now shake hands like gentlemen," she ordered, smiling. Her stern gaze forced the issue.

They shook hands.

The tension dispelled, Bobby turned away before he had to smile in reply to Geoff's grin.

"Hold on," Ash said.

"What?" Bobby turned back, the sarcastic grin spreading across his face.

Ash knelt next to the puppy. She scratched his ear, but Jack never took his eyes off Bobby. "His name is Jack. You need to apologize to him too."

"Ha!" Bobby laughed.

"It's a small world," Ash said, doing her best to follow Mrs. Rabier's advice. "There's no room for people carrying around grudges. You're going to apologize, you're going to mean it, and you're going to shake on it. I don't

want him worried that maybe you don't like him. Unless you're scared."

Bobby rolled his eyes. He was tense, perhaps afraid of the rambunctious dog, Ash knew the Dunkirk's owned a cat. If she could get Bobby and Jack to get along, that would be for the best. She didn't want Jack to go crazy every time he saw the boy.

Bobby knelt in front of Jack, and in a rare moment of forced maturity, he said, "Sorry for chasing you around like that." He stretched out his hand. "Shake on it?"

Jack rolled his head to a side, glancing from Ashley to Bobby, and sensing it was okay, raised a paw, deliberately putting it in Bobby's hand.

Bobby smiled and rubbed Jack's head. The beagle barked and tackled Bobby onto the ground, where they wrestled a bit. Jack was back to his hyper-energetic self. Bobby climbed to his feet laughing, while Jack bounced around the smiling kids.

From the edge of the circle, an older voice made itself heard. "Goddamn, you are such a bitch, Bobby. I'm embarrassed you're my brother."

The kids spun as if of one mind.

Evan, Bobby's older brother, stood a few feet away. He was fourteen and had hit his growth spurt early. He looked big enough to play for the varsity punchball team. With one foot on his hoverboard, he towered over the other kids. Two of his friends stood with him.

"You let a girl make you apologize to a dog? What the hell? Didn't I teach you better than that? Are you wearing panties?"

"What... It's just..." Bobby mumbled.

"I asked you a question," Evan snapped. "I said, Are you wearing panties?"

"No, What... Screw you, Evan."

Evan stepped forward, an arm raised overhead; Bobby flinched. The blow didn't come. Evan seemed satisfied with the flinch.

Evan looked at Ashley. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Your brother was being a dick," Ashley answered. "I see it runs in the family."

The kids gasped and held their breath.

"I'm a dick? I'll show you some dick." Evan stepped onto his board, walking it toward Ashley.

As soon as he was within range, Ashley kicked the hoverboard out from under him. He crashed to the ground and hastily scrambled back up to his feet.

Ashley had already taken a couple of steps back, out of range. She and Evan stared each other down. He hesitated.

Ash picked up Jack's leash from where it lay in the clearing and handed it to Geoff. "Put this back on Jack," she said.

Geoff nodded, took the leash and secured it to Jack's collar. Jack stared at Evan, growling quietly.

Evan hadn't taken his eyes off Ashley and continued to glare.

"Come on, we have to get home for dinner," Ash said.

As she and Geoff walked Jack from the clearing, Ashley noticed several smiles and nods aimed in her direction. Maybe martial arts camp wouldn't be so terrible after all.

Behind them, Ash heard Evan turn his ire on his brother. "What the hell is wrong with you, Bobby? Letting a girl boss you around like that?"

Then they were too far away to hear any more.

Ashley and Geoff led Jack into the low-walled patio section of the property. Ash released the clip from Jack's collar and hung the leash on its peg inside. She saw her school bag on one of the chairs inside the front door. Most likely her father was home, in his study. Usually he'd appear for dinner and then leave again until well after midnight. She waved to her mom in the kitchen and went upstairs to wash.

On the back patio, Geoff wrestled with Jack and scratched his ears.

From inside, his Mom said, "Get in here and get cleaned up."

Jack followed Geoff into the house only to be chased back outside. The puppy sat directly on the other side of the glass, panting and fogging the tinted pane.

Dr. Fox carried a file to the table as his wife chased Geoff into the nearby bathroom, attacking the task of cleaning the boy's face and arms. Fox thumbed through a top-secret logistics brief, his left hand resting on the Micronix device.

A few minutes later, Ana returned with Geoffrey, placed the last of the dishes on its wicker mat and looked upstairs. She took a deep breath to call for Ashley.

"I'll get her," Dr. Fox said.

Before he cleared his chair, Ashley appeared at the top of the stairs and came down. She took her seat and immediately noticed the black rectangle sitting before her father.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Work," he replied. "A paperweight."

Despite its near constant presence, it was rare that Andrew let his children catch a glimpse of the device. Neither of them had ever asked about it before.



Dr. Fox looked at both his children. "Don't ever, ever, touch this. Not under any circumstances."

Dr. Fox stared the point into both his children's eyes. "Is that understood?"

Both Ashley and Geoff nodded.

Ash looked away. Geoffrey looked at the black object. He looked as if he was going to reach out for it, but he didn't.

Their mother returned and began serving the meal. Geoffrey started shoveling food into his mouth. Ana finished serving and sat. Neither Ashley nor her father moved toward the food. Ashley had noticed that when he had something to say, he usually did it before he began eating.

Ana broke the ice. "There's something we've been talking about," she said.

Ashley tilted her head and looked at her father.

Dr. Fox met his daughter's gaze, "I've arranged for you to attend a special camp this summer."

During the school year, Ash had repeatedly asked to attend a specific ballet camp, her parents offered to think about it, an answer recognized by kids everywhere as synonymous with "No."

"It may interrupt your ballet training for a couple of weeks," her father said, "but Sifu Pan's Flying Dragons Martial Arts Academy is having a camp you should attend. Several of the instructors are accomplished dancers. The cross-training will help you with your ballet."

"Not as much as ballet camp would."

Her mother smiled but didn't say anything.

"Plus, I could get hurt," she pointed out.

"You could get hurt dancing," her father countered.

"I bet more people get hurt fighting."

Ashley's mother laughed openly.

Ashley looked down at her food for a moment, her jet-black locks concealing her face.

She raised her head and her looked back to her father. "What if Geoff wants to take Kung Fu when he's older, does he have to take ballet too?"

Thinking the issue was closed; Dr. Fox had raised his fork, but set it down again. "Yes," he answered.

"Wait, what?" Geoffrey asked.

"If he asks to study martial arts, then yes, that aggression should be balanced by a softer art. Maybe not dance, but music or oil painting, something, for balance," Dr. Fox answered.

"But that's not why you're making me take these classes; for balance?" Ashley asked.

"No, you're right," he replied. "With a boy, one who wanted to fight, you'd be trying to check aggression and develop maturity. With a girl, it's the opposite. You want to build physical self-esteem and intuition. But none of those reasons are why you have to do it. Those are just thoughts. You have to do it because I said so. Is that clear?"

In her father's study, the phone began to ring. He ignored it. It continued to ring as Dr. Fox held his daughter's stare. The ringing became incessant.

"Yes, clear." Ashley glared at her plate.

In the other room, the phone clicked over to the messaging system.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

"You're excused," Fox said.

Ashley stood and left the table.

The phone immediately began ringing again.

Dr. Fox nodded to his wife and rose from the table, crossing to his study to answer.

"What kind of problem?" he asked.

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## Chapter 4 – Gravity Knots

### A few minutes earlier...

Far out in the middle of the barren desert, the massive Project Epsilon Research Facility hung in the evening sky. No guards stood their posts, no vehicles moved on their patrols around the perimeter.

Documents, tatters of clothing and broken glass littered the interior of the facility. Doors hung from mangled hinges or lay at angles on the floor, unable to find comfortable positions as their handles kept them forever tilted just a few inches away from perfect slumber. Couches, chairs and desks, all reduced to kindling and wire-ribbed tumbleweeds of stuffing. Only short tongues of untended combustion moved, pacing themselves in their consumption of the scattered debris.

The relatively indestructible terminal monitors of the observation labs all flashed the same message, EVACUATE. Scattered across the floor lie the message's intended recipients, the lifeless bodies of the project technicians. Opposite the monitoring labs, small, comfortable cells lined the other side of the hall, each occupied by a single unmoving individual.

Naked, hairless and utterly still, the test subjects floated in the air, several feet above the floor of their cells. Before each of them hovered a small black rectangular object, a Micronix device. Anyone not preoccupied by a floating rectangle of black metal was lying in a crumpled heap, slowly oozing fluids.

In the very center of the facility, loose items had begun to gather. Bits of paper, glass and chunks of office furniture slowly began to slip and slide along the floors, eventually becoming trapped against other objects, walls or ceilings. The center of the facility began to churn with the debris. Human bodies, office appliances and furniture, all flowed forward to become a formless boiling mass. The center grew tight then burst into flame as white-hot fusion consumed the physical elements.

With a second pop, the burning knot at the center went dark, expanding exponentially; inhaling, igniting and consuming furniture, walls and floors as an ocean drinks from rivers. In a fraction of a second, the implosion

consumed the entire facility, leaving only a massive crater in the empty desert where Project Epsilon had once stood.

At the center of the devastation, one item survived. A rectangular chunk of black metal, single prototype, lay in the dust.

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In a separate, much smaller facility, hanging in orbit far above the desert site, three agents monitored the earth. That evening, they happened to be almost directly over southern California. They sat with their backs to one another, in a triangular formation, each occupied with their own bank of monitors and control panels. They wore full beards and sported various crazy longhair, as they were in deep space and had lost the desire shave and get regular haircuts.

The astronauts double-checked their screens and confirmed their readings.

"We'd better call Dr. Fox," Carlson said.

"Where is he anyhow?" Wilkins asked.

"Dinner with the family," Bryce answered.

"Fuck, man." Carlson dialed the doctor while his colleagues waited nervously. "It's the fucking machine, man!"

"Better dial again," Bryce said.

Carlson tapped resend and waited.

"Hey, Doctor Fox, this is Carlson, up on Kojima Station, we've got a problem with Epsilon."

"What kind of problem?" the doctor asked.

"Well, sir, it's gone."

"Gone?"

"Exploded, sir, or imploded maybe. We've forwarded our footage."

"How did it start? Anything preceding?" Fox asked.

"Are you sitting down sir? We're reading... There was some kind of accident, sir. We've got all the data backed up to the server, but on the internal security feeds... it was psychokinetic. Well, I have to tell you... We... It has been suggested that the server might be contaminated as well. We're not sure."

"Has it given you any strange readings?"

"We did see some lights, but it could be just a backup battery coming online. Anyhow, you should have the stream in just a couple of seconds. They were floating again and then everything got sucked toward the center of the facility."

"A gravity knot? Like before?"

"Yeah, only this time... No survivors."

"That we know of?"

"We're reading a fifty-kiloton release and an eleven-mile crater, sir. Flir and sonics show no life forms. However, we do have confirmation that a small black metal object is lying in the middle of the crater. One piece of shrapnel, that's all that's left."

"How small?"

"Looks like, flat rectangle, it would fit in the palm of your hand. Spectrometers register it as pure terillium."

"Thank you, Gentlemen."

"Kojima out."

An hour later Dr. Andrew Fox landed his transport in the bottom of the depression that had formerly been Project Epsilon. He knelt in the thin layer of soft dust. He appeared to be tying his shoe. When his hand touched the item, a shock went through him. The device was unique, different; it felt angry. Unlike the original device, the Micronix, this one announced itself. It told Dr. Fox, it was the Metachron.

He lifted the small device from the floor of the crater and dropped it into his pocket. The moment the device left his hand, he felt relieved. Fox stood in the center of the crater for several minutes, pondering the implications of this new development.

Several miles overhead the operators aboard Kojima chuckled. "He's good," Carlson said. "I didn't even see that. Did you see that?"

"I didn't," Bryce replied. "Smooth."

"Even the cameras didn't see it. Smooth," Wilkins laughed.

"Too bad the new spectrometer got him," Carlson said. "Oh, what? It's not recording? Fellas, we may have a glitch with the new spectrometer, it seems it has a habit of turning the record function off."

"Noted," Bryce and Wilkins laughed.

Fox knew these men personally; there was little doubt where their loyalties lie.

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## **Chapter 5 – Otto Malvinas**

**Two weeks later...**

**Ashley's Journal - June 28th**

I remember something woke me up, last night. I don't even remember sitting up, but that was how I woke up. One of the houses across the canyon was on fire, the house with all the windows.

There's something strange about that place.

\*\*\*

**A few hours earlier,**

Across the canyon from the Fox home, rows of houses were set into the hillside. At the crest, a series of cascading balconies concealed an operations center behind tinted panes. By their dress and bearing, it was clear the occupants were field agents of the highest caliber, all but one.

To describe Fifth Gate Citizen Otto Malvinas as portly would do the man a disservice. Otto had spent a lifetime acquiring his bulk. Weighing a stout three seventy, he boasted of being as wide as he was tall.

Otto had decided to visit the post upon learning of an auspicious conference scheduled for the next day. Dr. Fox was to address a group of investors about the highly touted MCX Device. He was expected to declare the project a failure. The recent explosion of the Epsilon Research Facility had been front-page news. Investigators still had not determined the composition of the explosive, let alone who might have been responsible for the sabotage. The massive yield of the blast had prematurely ruled out accidental causes.

Several conglomerates were deeply invested in the project. Otto, an executive with Pierce Financial, had recently acquired Washington Security

and had come out to personally inspect the Fox account.

A stiff Captain Faulkner walked Chairman Malvinas through the operation. Otto was intrigued by the pipe dream of the MCX, and felt that technological breakthroughs were better intercepted early. The parent company of Washington Security, Monaco GP, had recently come into financial troubles. Otto took his personal company, Malvinas Trust, and gobbled up Monaco. The Fox security contract was confidential, but being an owner does have its privileges.

Otto had come down with his bodyguard to inspect the operation. He and Logan had arrived late, after eleven, and were now standing in the central command room with Captain Faulkner. The captain explained that the house was filled with surveillance equipment and long-range suppressed weapons, all controlled by a master switchboard. He pointed out that the drives recording the assigned residence were backed up to double blind positions. Plus, the DOD had vetted all involved personnel to ensure competence and loyalty.

Malvinas had many questions for the captain, and it was clear the officer's patience was being tested. Logan asked permission to step outside and smoke a cigarette.

A young sergeant monitoring the surveillance screens interrupted the captain. He pointed out the arrival of a large truck on the street between the command post and the client. It touched down, and three armed operatives stepped from the back of the truck.

Upon sight of the operatives, the command post came alive with activity. The surveillance systems delivered high-contrast images of the mercenaries as they made their way across the canyon floor toward the Fox home.

Otto smiled with excitement. "What happens now?" he asked.

"Now it gets fun," Captain Faulkner replied, smiling for the first time since Otto's arrival.

The captain designated Chief Warrant Officer Lee and Sergeant Buckner to suit up and intercept the mercenaries. The other agents at nearby monitors called out relevant conditions as Buckner and Lee pulled on their battle dress uniforms.

Fully equipped, the two soldiers stepped out onto the main deck of the home. Lee snapped down his visor and triggered the up-linked displays and data feeds. With the enhanced optics, they could easily see the enemy as they moved toward the Fox residence.

Lee and Buckner crossed the deck, strapped in and released their ropes. They vanished over the railing, moments later reaching the ground, several

hundred feet below. The canyon floor was spotted with homes. Backyards overflowed onto narrow strips of unclaimed municipal property, all of which butted up against the forest preserve. Lights were out, most families fast asleep.

Inside the command post, on the flickering screens, Faulkner and Malvinas watched the images of Lee and Buckner as they chased down the interlopers, quickly closing the gap as they came down the hillside. The group of intruders had reached the other side. As the ground became steeper, they slowed.

Captain Faulkner stood next to Otto as the surrounding agents relayed details to him. From their place in the command center, the two men could see nothing through the glass walls. It was the monitors that tracked the participants from dozens of angles and across several frequencies.

The mercenaries continued to advance on the Fox residence, oblivious of their imminent discovery by Lee and Buckner.

Captain Faulkner cracked his knuckles in anticipation.

Logan returned to the command post from his cigarette break.

Faulkner sniffed the air, burnt oil and carbon, the signature of a recently fired weapon.

Logan raised his handgun and shot Captain Faulkner in the face. The suppressor reduced the sound to a cough.

As Faulkner's men pulled their weapons, Logan shot each of them in turn. Surrounded by dying agents, Otto licked his lips in satisfaction, right on schedule.

Logan then raised the weapon on his employer, who had just enough time for expressions of both shock and indignation to flash across his face before Logan fired three times into his chest. Otto fell.

In the kitchen, Logan opened cabinets. He grabbed a bottle of lighter fluid and jerked the stove from the wall. He disconnected the gas line and opened the valve.

In the living room, Logan doused the bodies and equipment with the fuel. He balled up a piece of paper and covered it. Logan knelt beside Otto as the large man choked on his own blood. Logan stuffed the paper into Otto's mouth and lit an edge. The flames ran across Otto's oil soaked skin and clothes. The fire engulfed the handmade silk suit and leapt to the floor. It dashed across the room, up the legs of the couches and surveillance terminals. Soon the entire post was alight.

Logan was halfway down the hill before the gas bleeding out of the kitchen reached the living room. The sound wasn't an explosion, but rather a whoosh, like a jet engine igniting, briefly illuminating the canyon.



Lee and Buckner had already noticed a distinct lack of response from their HQ. Several systems had gone off line, short-circuited by the oil and flame. When the residence ignited, the fireball confirmed their worst fears.

The three soldiers ahead of them suddenly broke formation. The center man turned around and began to advance, coming back downhill, his comrades moved to the flanks. They had the high ground, Tactics 101. Buckner and Lee had been betrayed and were now outnumbered at least two to one, with hostile forces in front and behind.

Emergency fire systems kicked on in the command post, evacuating the oxygen through a vent in the roof, producing another bright fireball. Inside the building, the remaining flames were extinguished with automated blasts of foam. The canyon faded into darkness again.

Huddled in the open area between residential backyards, Lee gave Buckner the signal for smoke. He gestured for Buckner to throw his to the left, while he threw to the right. The grenades popped and further obscured the summer evening.

The chief warrant officer told Buckner to attach his silencer and pulled his from a pocket. Lee gestured for Buckner to move back to a covered position, himself disappearing to the left.

Two mercenaries came through the smoke, first one from the left, followed by his comrade from the right. Confused, they met and continued downhill toward Buckner's covered position. As Sergeant Buckner centered them in his sights, the head of the man to the left exploded all over his brother in arms.

The second man ducked, intent on returning fire. Instead, Sgt. Buckner's bullet ended his intentions. The sergeant had been aiming for the man's midsection but the round went through the mercenary's chin, slapping into the underside of the helmet.

Lee stepped out of the darkness and fired toward the young sergeant. Buckner heard a cry from behind; Logan fell dead, just short of the sergeant's position. He looked down at the bodyguard and back at the smoldering residence.

Lee dashed over to Logan, while Buckner kept an eye out for the unexpected. He rolled the dead man onto his back. After a cursory search of the mercenary's pockets, he discovered Captain Faulkner's access card. It was the security team's only means of access to the Fox residence, in case of an emergency.

Lee knew the rest of his team was probably dead, but he was relieved to know that Dr. Fox and his family were still secure. The three commandos

represented little actual danger; they were bait. Standard devices couldn't breach the exterior of the home. Without the inside man and Faulkner's card, there was little real threat to the family.

A suppressed shot rang out and slammed Buckner to the ground. Lee rolled back against the garage. He snapped the card in half and then stomped on the pieces. He even fired on the plastic bits, just for good measure.

As he scanned for the remaining mercenary, Lee wondered why the enemy hadn't pulled out big money on a job like this. He'd been afraid of facing down advanced biomechs, but these were just regular guys. He felt cheated.

Buckner groaned from the manicured lawn. Lee realized that at least the mercs carried suppressors. He wouldn't have to worry about curious homeowners investigating the sounds of gunfire. He scanned the hillside again, but couldn't pinpoint the shooter. Lee realized he couldn't hide until daybreak, so he leapt forward, grabbed the wounded sergeant by his belt and dragged him to cover.

The canyon remained quiet.

Buckner gradually woke. He pulled off his helmet and fingered the burnt hole where the incoming round had ripped through the cloth cover before striking the bulletproof composite, knocking him senseless.

In the distance, they heard the approaching sirens of the emergency crews dispatched to the ruins of their command post. Buckner relaxed against the garage wall, rubbing his neck. Lee placed a call to corporate, downtown.

\*\*\*

In his study, Dr. Andrew Fox sat before the monitor bank. He'd observed the events as they happened, from security and satellite feeds. As soon as the mercenaries had arrived, back up units were in route, but Fox had missed Logan killing the first guards. If he'd been more alert, maybe he could have warned Faulkner.

Soon the corpses were cleaned up, while Lee and Buckner were moved to a safe location for debriefing. The back up units remained vigilant, discretely parked around the neighborhood. Fox had the local media suppressed, in the interests of National Security.

A bit later, he stood, set his array of monitors to sleep, went to the bathroom and vomited.

On his way to bed, he checked on the children. Ashley's room was first; her bed was empty. Ashley's window faced the canyon. It was possible the fire had awakened her.

Fox crossed the hall to Geoffrey's room; brother and sister were curled up

together. Satisfied on several levels, Fox closed the door. It was a full hour before sleep caught up with him. He held a black rectangle nestled in his palm. The second prototype, the Metachron, lay on the nightstand.

\*\*\*

The beagle woke Fox at dawn, barking downstairs. Curious, he went to see what the fuss was all about. He knew the house was secure; the early-warning systems would have roused him before floppy-eared Jack became aware of any threat.

Down the back stairs, Andrew found Geoffrey and Jack nose to glass, staring out through the glass panel doors, directly into an earthbound cloudbank. The house was enclosed in a dense fog. Jack was probably barking at nothing, but the black rectangle warmed under the doctor's anxious grip.

Across his mind, the security displays filled his visual awareness with data. It was clear that the house was secure. All the doors and windows were sealed and there were no heat signatures revealing recent human activity, other than those of his family.

The security residence displayed a bit of activity. Even under the fog, the satellite feed revealed the investigators, combing through the scene. Dr. Fox located his replacement teams, parked in strategic locations on nearby roads.

The fog looked so thick the windows appeared to be frosted. Yet it billowed with a heavy texture. Something dark flashed just beyond their ability to make it out. Jack barked wildly. A bird struck the window. They all jumped.

Behind them, watching from the stairs, Ashley gasped. A moment later, her mom, Ana joined them, sitting on the step next to her daughter. The family watched the heavens pass by as birds played the role of angels, fluttering through the clouds as they journeyed to wherever clouds, and birds lost in them, go.

As the day grew brighter and the sun continued to rise, warmth penetrated the heavenly vapor. Within a few minutes breakfast was ready and the backyard was visible again, covered with the dewy remnants of the clouds. The sky grew dark, and as the family ate, it briefly rained.

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## Chapter 6 – Summer Days

### Ashley's Journal - June 28th

This is our one real week of summer. Rivendell is closed for renovations, and we still have a week before we leave for camp.

I can't imagine having three whole months to do whatever I want. I don't know what I would do. I would just practice, probably. I already did two hours this morning.

\*\*\*

All over the city, people rose and prepared for their day. Yet somehow, today was different. People drove more cautiously, and there was less traffic than usual. The headlines weren't good; the war was starting again. From the front lines in San Diego to San Antonio, the Christian Communist Peoples Party had been pushing north; mounting strikes deep into the heartland. Not to mention the mujahideen coming down from Canada on horseback, harassing federal outposts all across the border. Meanwhile, the government fought internal corruption scandals in the headlines of every major news outlet.

Early that morning, intelligence agents met their handlers at safe houses. Today everyone was working; today there was heavy chatter. Interested parties assembled in loose convoys, out on the fringes of municipal airspace. In locked rooms and tinted vehicles, mercenaries cleaned their weapons and loaded magazines. Directives were confirmed and memorized.

Dr. Fox listened in on the transmissions from home. The briefing location would be released over two minute intervals, first to federal officers, cascading down to the juniors. The traffic would be screened for leaks, all branches were ordered to participate.

The department sent a security team to escort the doctor to the briefing. Andrew said goodbye to his wife and children.

Once the vehicle lifted off Andrew placed the call; the truth was there, but concealed. The briefing would be held aboard a restaurant called Fuji Dozo,

docked at the heart of the city.

The docking times had been carefully segregated. When the Department of Defense wants to know if you're a security leak, they don't just ask you, they tempt you. Hungry fish get caught. Operation Rusty Bucket was concerned with plugging leaks; the briefing itself was secondary. Fuji Dozo didn't even exist. Andrew had created the name, and then researched it, just to be sure. When he made the announcement he was confident that no one in North America had ever before put those two words together as the proper name of a restaurant.

The facility wasn't even a restaurant; Fox had simply rented a conference hall. The dock numbers and loading times were all that mattered. Giving the location an exotic name was the key that allowed the analysts to track the leaks. Any unauthorized transmission of those two words between the hours of ten and noon was a crime punishable by death.

Two minutes after ten, the first group of attendees was informed. Composed of high-level government personnel, they were on the inside, all well aware of the mole hunt in progress. Among this group, no leaks were detected.

At 10:04, the second docking appointments were revealed to specifically interested private banks and corporations. The volume of chatter instantly spiked. The first moles had exposed themselves. Andrew listened as one group after another leaked the information, and then denied it.

Operation Rusty Bucket was in full swing. The returning data streams were undeniable. Within minutes of a leak, offices were stormed; suspects arrested and interrogated on the spot. Several administrations would find themselves a few pounds lighter by the end of the day.

Andrew believed the explosion that destroyed Epsilon was undoubtedly a result of the experiment. However, without supporting evidence, the possibility of sabotage couldn't be ignored. A round of whack-a-mole now and again was considered good training. The government had always been a disgrace when it came to secrets, but Andrew knew his department was secure.

The briefing was a waste of time, but it had to be done. Andrew needed to explain what had happened to the investors. The interface was an egregiously expensive failure, and someone had to answer for all that red ink. That someone, in this case, was Dr. Andrew Fox. He smiled at the irony of it all, and realized he had an ace up his sleeve. This time, he could just tell them the truth.

\*\*\*

Geoff was in the backyard, playing with Jack, whose energy propelled him all over the yard. Geoffrey would try to catch him, only to have Jack leap away, excited to for him to try again.

"Want to go down the canyon?" Geoffrey asked Jack, who dashed around the yard, excited by any mention of the great adventure beyond the property line.

"Hey, Ash, want to go down the canyon with us?" Geoff asked her.

"Geoff, you shouldn't go out there by yourself."

"I never go by myself," he answered.

"Jack doesn't count."

"Then why did you make Bobby shake his hand?"

"Because I'm a jerk," Ashley said. "It was mean, and someday I'm going to hell."

"Is that where bad people go when they die?" Geoff asked.

The children's parents hadn't raised them with any sort of religious background. Geoff genuinely had no concept of a spiritual afterlife. Ashley had only recently encountered the phrase at school.

Ash nodded. "Where'd you hear that?" she asked.

"Vid streams," he replied.

"What have you been watching?"

"Wooden Stakes. You know you can make a wooden stake from almost anything?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. Chair legs, broom sticks and stuff."

"That so?"

"Listen to this! One time, Simon Timex, that's the hero... "

"Simon Timex?"

"Yeah! 'Time waits for no man!' He rolled up this piece of paper all pointy like, and he stabbed the one vampire with it, right through the chest!"

Ashley laughed.

"Don't laugh! It could work. A piece of paper, it's made of wood! Get it?" Geoff asked.

"I get it," Ashley smiled. "But I doubt it would work?"

"If the vampires come, we just might have to find out," he answered, dead serious.

Ashley laughed again.

"It could happen. If it was a plague, or a disease, or a virus."

"Those are all the same things," Ashley smiled.

"Yeah, right, sure," it was Geoff's turn to laugh. "Then why are they different words?"

His supreme confidence pushed his sister into a fit of hysterical laughter. "They're the same."

Geoff snorted. "Do you want to go down to the canyon with me or not?"

"Get the leash," Ashley replied.

"All right!" Geoff dashed into the house. "Mom, we're going to take Jack down the canyon!" he shouted.

"Take your sister with you," she replied. "And don't forget the leash."

Geoffrey grabbed the leash from its peg, and burst into the back yard.

Ash looked out at the green waves of forest. Since vacation started, they had gone down the canyon everyday. Often they would be gone the better part of the afternoon, chasing Jack through the lush vegetation and massive trees, standing as if pillars in a leaf-domed cathedral.

Usually Jack set the pace. Once off the hated leash, he couldn't be corralled until he was exhausted. Ashley laughed as Jack caught Geoffrey's contagious excitement, and leapt into the air, chasing after a yellow butterfly that had drifted into the yard.

"Come on, Jack!" Geoff said. The puppy licked his face as Geoff slipped the choke chain over the beagle's head, where it rattled against his collar. Then the boy and his dog were running down into the canyon. Ashley followed her brother and Jack from the yard, down the path, and into the overgrown wilderness.

\*\*\*

The access streets to Executive Suites West gradually filled with well-dressed but heavysset young men, and their expensive cars illegally parked up and down the block. The cafes were packed with black-suited professional thugs. There were few females among the mercenaries, but those present appeared more dangerous than their comrades.

Most of the usual customers took one peek inside, and left without a fuss. Those who insisted on their morning coffee, found themselves bullied at every turn. They were bumped, jostled and openly assaulted. Regular customers were chased from the shops, cash and drinks stolen, pockets divested of their contents.

Even the mercenaries found it ironic, that they were terrorizing employees of the very corporations that had hired them. Within forty minutes, the docks and shops were secure; meaning they were lined with the heavily armed

agents, and devoid of civilian bystanders.

Fuji Dozo had been staffed with a higher grade of soldier, all fiercely loyal to the defense department. Uncle Sam had, after all, provided their recent cybernetic augmentations, even if he'd taken the limbs in the first place. They loved their country, and had pledged lives to its flag.

Dr. Fox was not so similarly blinded. He had no ethical problems with breaking federal laws in the pursuit of science. He understood the legislature had always been a hundred years behind real progress. *How could ignorant bureaucrats possibly imagine themselves in a place of authority over him? They were not experts. They were not authorities. They were petty idiots; he wouldn't let them wash his car. How could they be expected to write coherent and honest laws?*

Andrew often argued the pros and cons in his head. More often than not it was a manifestation of guilt, a signal that he was heading off the range. He felt he could commiserate with Camus's sentiment that the most significant question in life was whether or not one should commit suicide. Andrew wasn't committing suicide, not today. He had a wife and child to consider. Children, he reminded himself. Children.

Giving into the distraction, Andrew pulled up their charts. The dedicated satellite found them close to home, running down a canyon path with Jack. The nearby individuals were all children; no adults were present. Andrew leaned back into his seat, and watched traffic drift around the cruiser.

Fox instructed the pilot to remain in orbit. They cruised the freeways until just before noon. After all the other incoming parties had arrived, the pilot touched down and secured the craft. A moment later, Fuji Dozo gave the signal for departure. With the hatches sealed and loading ramps disconnected, the facility jettisoned from its docking station.

\*\*\*

Geoffrey could never keep up with the rambunctious puppy. Consequently, Jack raced down the hillside, only to return to the children at full speed. Upon confirmation that Ashley and her younger brother were continuing after him, Jack would again explode down the path, only to later return. Geoff thought the puppy was hysterical.

A dog barked in the distance and Jack replied, accelerating out of sight. Ash looked at the leash in her brother's hand. "That's not doing us much good, is it?"

"The leash is for when he's tired," Geoff explained, between great gulps of air.



"Is that how it works?" she replied.

"Yeah, when it's time to go home, that's when we use the leash. Remember?"

Ashley did remember, despite her younger brother's constant reminders. Last week, he'd talked of nothing but the puppy and their forested adventures. Jack also seemed to appreciate the space to run without breaking things.

Despite its natural abundance of hollow glens and hidden corners, during summer vacation the canyon got crowded with bored students. Hoverboards could be raced at top speed, while forts were hastily assembled and defended. The canyon was both a place to hang out and get lost.

The forest ahead was spotted with neighborhood kids. Ash knew most of them. She recognized some of the kids closer to Geoff's age near an old tree, hunting lizards and bugs.

Geoffrey chased Jack down the trails, laughing in response to barks of excitement and breathless endurance. Ashley watched as the dog literally ran circles around her younger brother. Geoff had long since given up the leash. Ash had looped it over her shoulders.

A group of fourth graders were engaged in a reconnaissance mission. Decked out in makeshift army uniforms, they stealthily crept across the overgrown canyon floor, camouflaged and determined to remain unseen. As none of the older kids were looking for them, success was mostly a matter of opinion. If the bigger, meaner kids caught on to a stealth mission in progress, steps would be taken to foil it. Big kids enjoyed nothing more than ruining a little kid's day. Capturing and torturing would-be commandos ranked right up there at the top of the list.

A couple of kids Ashley's age, Doug and Jamie, hid along the path that Ash and Geoff came down. Jack dashed past them earlier, but he hadn't noticed them, and they stayed put. Ash and Geoff followed soon after Jack, who'd run back and forth past the camouflaged pair twice now.

Geoff also marched right past the hidden commandos. Ashley had noticed them some time before, and as she passed, she winked to them, her ocean blue eyes dazzling, reflecting shards of glittering sunshine.

Doug and Jamie were both intoxicated with Ashley. She was easily the prettiest girl in the neighborhood, and the coolest too. When she smiled, she meant it; they naturally liked her.

Ashley caught sight of older kids overhead, doing tricks on their kite boards. A kite board was really just a more powerful hoverboard with a sail mounted to it, making the device that much more maneuverable. Ground-bound, hoverboards required a hard surface to push off from, and couldn't

maintain more than a few feet of air, but kite boards, with their powerful gravity disks, could easily ascend to higher elevations.

During the summers, the open sky of Angel City was teeming with kite boarders. They raced through the clouds, doing loops, barrel rolls and corkscrews. When she watched, Ashley desperately wanted one, regardless of the fact that it was a male-dominated sport. Yet somehow, outside the canyon, she always found herself focused exclusively on ballet.

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## Chapter 7 – Rusty Bucket

Before the meeting began, Operation Rusty Bucket had to some holes to fill. Suspect operatives found themselves pushed out of vehicles or framed for murder. Two were arrested with large quantities of illegal drugs, and another team was caught with explosives.

By eleven am, seventeen agents had been shot dead along the trench of shops, jogging lanes and park benches that made up Executive Suites West. One incident, between the DIA and FBI, put three members on each side in the morgue.

An ATF agent, a long suspected informant for Pierce Financial, took his own life when confronted with superior numbers. Wounded agents were dropped at medical divisions or in the ocean, depending. Half the city watched as one entire convoy was blown from altitude.

On Fuji Dozo, the attendees were each assigned specific docking times and approach vectors. Security was paramount, as each group would be delivering twenty million in cash. The delegates could anchor three vehicles on the facility, but only six men would be permitted to deliver the cash, and attend the briefing. Handguns were allowed, but no assault rifles could enter the building.

As the delegations made their way from their vehicles to the meeting hall, hostilities fell off dramatically. The senior executives and their elite guards were better behaved than the rabble employed to infest their incoming routes.

Once the facility departed, Operation Rusty Bucket was concluded. The information had been tracked and compartmentalized. Over a hundred treasonable acts had been committed. Thirty suspects were already in custody, along with another twenty who had been terminated. By sunset, sixty-two people had been charged. The operation was considered a resounding success.

Fox considered it an utter failure; his department didn't have security problems. A mole hunt with a hundred suspects meant the problem was systemic. It could not be rooted out in a single pass. The corruption was a problem of political culture. This wave of treason charges was only a symptom, not a cure.

At noon, two delegations were still not present; one was the convoy that had been fallen from altitude in flames, the other remained an unexplained absence. Fuji Dozo cast off without further incident.

The clamshell-shaped hall was dominated by a mahogany table at the lowest level, opposite two rows of six tables each, arrayed in gentle curves before it. The tables held pitchers, filled with water and glistening beads of condensation. Only a few chairs occupied the tables, along with microphones, set into slender vases at the center. The bodyguards stood behind their chairmen's assigned seats. The second row of delegates sat on a higher tier, so the standing mercenaries didn't obscure them from the front.

The outer shell of the hall was composed of tinted sheaves of glass, attached to massive hinges at the far sides of the room. Outside, a wide balcony held café tables naked against the sky.

Fox entered the hall with two men he had known most of his life, the Secretary of Defense and National Intelligence Director. Secretary Croswell was known for going against the grain; he helped the little guys, and kicked big guys in the shin. Holding a position usually reserved for civilians, he was a heavily muscled veteran of three wars. Croswell was gruff, surly and couldn't be rushed into anything.

Director Stanwood was Croswell's complete opposite, both physically and personally. He was Caesar to Croswell's Pompey, the embodiment of ambition, as opposed to natural talent. A former lawyer and non-vet serving in his first executive post, Stanwood was lean and wiry; he tended to strike as soon as conditions became favorable, the concept of mercy was alien to him.

"Was the mole hunt really necessary?" Fox asked.

"It would seem so," Stanwood said. "Considering."

"I'm not sure if that's good or bad," Croswell said.

The three of them had been at the top of their class, but only Croswell had been valedictorian and a gifted athlete. Fox and Croswell had been close since childhood. They always impressed one another, and never disappointed or betrayed one another.

Fox had shown no interest in athletics, and could have beaten Jim's GPA with his eyes closed, if he hadn't been busy tackling world changing medical breakthroughs. He only stayed in school because it was easy, and he enjoyed the social interaction.

Stanwood could have been at the top of the class, except he wasn't. He pretended to like Croswell, they had an agreed upon ceasefire since the third grade.

However, Andrew Fox and Joseph Stanwood had never reached that mutual understanding. Stanwood hated everything about Fox, he always had. Most of all, he hated the fact that Andrew didn't fear Stanwood, as others did. Rather, he didn't seem to consider him at all. Fox was the only person who routinely forgot Stanwood, his competitive aggression left Fox unimpressed.

Furthermore, Fox had never given Stanwood any concrete reason for his hatred. He was simply the person that Stanwood always wanted to be, in nearly every way.

Fox had occasionally stuck the three of them out on a limb, but never like today. Fox knew, if anyone ever killed him, it would be Joseph Stanwood's doing. For Stanwood to go after Andrew, he would have to get Jim's approval. If it ever went that far, then this wasn't a world Fox wanted to hang around for.

Fox, Stanwood and Crosswell reached the center dais and took their seats at the table.

Congressman Harris stood up. "Gentlemen," he said. "As I look around today, I see some of the most influential men of the world. Senators Clarke, Grey and Miller, Citizens Morgan, Roth and Anderson. And I dare not leave out the youngest personage present." Harris grinned. "Citizen Pierce, you must be hardly out of your teens."

Pierce was obscured behind four mammoth crates of cash.

"He certainly seems interested, doesn't he, Dr. Fox?" Harris said.

Fox had heard about the young Pierce; he had an explosive temper and a penchant for gunfights. He had no doubt the cases were props for some idiotic outburst.

Harris addressed Pierce directly, "You know, the installments are just a show of good faith. It goes straight to the treasury department, to offset operating costs. Fox doesn't see a dime. We're all equally interested in success of this project." Harris spoke to Pierce, but Fox suspected the words were meant for him.

"We all know why we're here," Senator Clarke said, cutting off his colleague. He nodded to Fox, gesturing for him to get started.

Fox stood with exaggerated slowness. He slipped his chair into place and came around the table. "I don't know if you read the report. It wasn't sabotage; it was the interface. The human variable is too unstable. It's over."

The delegates remained silent.

"Okay, but unstable how?" Senator Clarke asked.

"Initially, it discriminated based on intellect. The smart ones survived, and

acquired more power than they knew what to do with."

"Ha! We could call it life," Harris joked.

A few delegates laughed.

"The survivors destroyed themselves," Fox said. "In the end, they all died."

"What was the initial ratio?" Senator Clarke asked.

"Ratio?" Fox asked.

"Success to failure; one to one, two to one?" the senator inquired.

"One to one, but that's irrelevant. Today, it is one to forty thousand."

Clarke briefly conferred with Senator Miller and Harris.

After a moment, they returned their attention to Fox.

"What's interfacing?" Congressman Harris asked.

"What?" Fox asked, surprised. He realized that while the Senators were fully aware of the project, they were going to make him lay it out for them.

"You said interfacing?" Harris asked. "You called this the Mental Computer Interface? Is that correct?"

Dr. Fox stood quietly for a moment. He scanned the crowd, they weren't scientists; they had no idea what he was talking about. Harris, Clarke and Miller knew everything, but no one else did. They hadn't read their briefing reports; after all, this was the briefing.

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Jack and Geoff escaped Ashley's line of sight while she'd been distracted by the kite boards. She ran off after them, frustrated to have let them get away. She had no problem chasing after them; she kind of enjoyed the responsibility. Except when Geoff got into something before she could stop him, then she both resented the authority and the responsibility.

From around the bend, and down a shallow slope, she heard Jack barking excitedly. Geoff and Jack had disturbed a group of older boys doing tricks on their hoverboards in a shallow forest bowl.

Ashley rounded the corner, and slid down to where Geoff was being lectured. He looked scared, and Jack barked wildly. Above the racket, Ash heard a familiar voice.

When the older boys saw her, they forgot about Geoff. At their center was Evan Dunkirk.

Ashley stopped a little distance away. Jack ran over to her. Ash knelt to pet him. She was old enough to understand the differences between men and women, and knew that physical beauty could cause strange reactions in people, especially boys. She was aware she possessed this characteristic by the way people behaved around her. Young men had a tendency to stare, and

adults would speak more politely or be more reserved around her. It allowed Ashley to be more reserved in general.

"You ought to keep that thing on a leash," Evan snapped at her.

Ashley had also noticed that not all the attention she received was positive. "Why's that?" she asked, calmly.

"Cause dogs in the park have to have a leash. Those are the rules, and you know it." Evan popped his hoverboard against the ground. It hummed as the charge built up.

"Those same rules say hoverboards need a leash," she said.

Evan took his foot off the board, and it shot toward Ashley. She didn't move. It missed her, but only just.

"See, where's your leash?" she asked.

Jack pursued the board across the forest floor.

"What's your problem, Fox?" Evan asked.

"You," Ashley said.

"No, I'm the solution," Evan said.

Evan's friends gasped, chuckled and giggled at her.

"Oh, that's a threat?" Ashley asked.

"Yeah, what are you going to do about it?" he taunted.

Ashley smiled, "I guess I'll let you live, this time."

Evan's friends burst into laughter.

"Yeah, I'm really scared."

In the distance, Jack wrestled with the board, which continued to slip away from him.

"If that animal slobbers on my board, you're going to have a real problem."

"Jack," Ashley called. Jack trotted over and sat next to her.

Evan's board continued to drift away, sliding down the gently sloped hill

"Come on, Geoff. Let's go somewhere else," Ashley said to her brother, momentarily forgotten by Evan and his crew.

"Yeah, come on, Jack," Geoffrey echoed.

"You're not going anywhere, until someone goes and gets my board," Evan said.

Ash looked at the board. It had drifted a good distance down the canyon. In the distance, she saw two other kids, playing at being soldiers, creeping closer to the confrontation. She looked back to Evan.

"Go get it, yourself," Ash replied, with all the condescension she could muster.

Evan's friends snickered and laughed. He glared over his shoulder at one of the laughing kids and snapped, "Jason, you think it's so funny, you go get

it."

"Why me?" Jason replied.

"Cause you still have a board. Unless you want me to knock you off of it."

Evan took a couple of steps toward Jason, who retreated by sliding away. "I'd rather hit a fat kid than a girl!" Evan roared.

Jason turned and angled down the hill.

Ash saw Doug and Jamie, moving along the tree line, a few feet behind the bigger kids. Doug signaled two kids she hadn't seen yet. She spotted them, hiding near a dense thicket of brush.

Jason gained speed as he approached the board. He scooped it up from a crouched position and made a wide turn back uphill. He bounced his board a few times, charging to gain some elevation, and coast back toward the group of kids. Then something big and heavy came flying toward his head, and he wiped out, both boards flying away from him and sliding downhill.

"What the hell?" Jason yelled, already angry. "Who threw that?"

Jack growled and began barking again. Ash slid the choke chain around his neck.

"That's right, leash your bitch, bitch," Evan said. He stepped forward, his arm raised overhead, close enough to swing at her.

Ash remembered how he'd punked-out Bobby. She doubted he'd actually swing at her. She didn't flinch.

The canyon was silent. Even the birds made no sound.

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## Chapter 8 – The Micronix

"I see some new faces, so let me start over," Fox said. "Gentlemen, you are here to check on an investment, correct? That investment was the Micronix or Mental Computer Interface. It was marketed to your agencies as a major leap in telecommunications."

Fox jumped into the pitch. "A single device that could translate and transmit any intercepted data stream, directly to the user's mind. A signal directly into your head." He'd given this pitch, literally, a thousand times.

"The idea was, no more monitors, no more keyboards, no more invasive data ports, plugs, or memory sticks. Nothing but a hand-held signal amplifier."

Instinctively, Fox reached into his pocket and pulled out the Micronix. He stood it on the table next to him. It was part of the pitch, the bell ringer, the solid object.

*Damn! Damn, damn.* Fox told everyone that they had all been destroyed in the accident. Now he'd physically shown it to them. *What the hell, Doctor?*

The room was silent.

Fox relaxed, he had his answer to the next question.

"I thought you said they'd all been destroyed?" Harris asked.

"This is the original prototype," he said. "A marketing placebo."

He jumped ahead, call to action. "We've got flying chariots and cities in the clouds, right? This should have worked. After all, what are we; if not liquid-core computers?"

Fox paused for dramatic effect, but the presentation had derailed weeks ago, when the facility reduced itself to a half-inch layer of dust on the desert floor.

Simply to fill the silence, Fox continued, "We naturally transmit electrical signals to the brain. We hoped to communicate, digitally, without any physical invasion. The brain is just a network of neurons, transmitting electrical signals. It should have worked just as easily as we transform signals from the retina or the eardrum. Just communicate directly with the frontal lobes, without inserting any wiring in the mind itself. Getting wired and

plugged has it's own problems, the idea was to eliminate all of that."

Fox picked up the prototype. "The plan was to go wireless, no fiber optics, no wires in the brain. That was the idea, anyhow. We just couldn't make it work. Initially half the subjects couldn't even link with it. You need a certain amount of intellectual capacity just to use it at all. If the subject wasn't smart enough, it, um, just sort of fried their brains."

The delegates remained quiet.

"Some people could receive, but not transmit, some got nosebleeds, some went comatose and there was, well.... More significant damage."

"Significant how?" Senator Clarke asked.

"Permanently significant," Dr. Fox replied.

"Explain, please."

Fox took a deep breath.

"One guy blew his brains out. I don't mean suicide, not with a gun or anything. His mind, his brain, it overheated; physically exploded all over the room. We kept them isolated during their first experience, just in case. We set the interface on a table, just like this, only we had an air lock. We told them the risks. We gave them the information, and let them make their own decision."

Fox looked at the floor, feeling deeply ashamed.

"In that very first instant of contact, the moment your hand touches the item.... Some people claimed that time slowed down, or stopped all together. Those were the ones still capable of communication. The others..." Dr. Fox shook his head.

Senator Cheryl Warrington spoke up from the back row. "And you continued the trials? Through all of this?" The revulsion in her voice was tangible. Formerly a medical doctor, Cheryl was the only female delegate present. This was her first encounter with the project.

Fox noted the frustration and anger in her voice. He sympathized with her but suspected she was out of her league. Fox knew the hubris she'd discovered here was as poisonous as any disease she'd ever tackled as the nation's surgeon general. Now serving her first term as a state senator, Fox suspected it had been a long four years. She didn't look as if she could do two more.

Secrets can be like a cancer in your brain, rotting your soul. Watching the senator, Fox realized her internal pressure cooker had finished preheating. He smiled, after all, it was classified; she couldn't talk to anyone else, so she may as well take her frustration out on those responsible. Unfortunately, *'those responsible'* applied mostly to Fox himself.

"You killed how many people with this little fiasco?" Senator Warrington

asked.

Dr. Fox seemed confused. "I'm sorry, you want what, numbers?"

"I want to know how many people died because of this project."

Fox didn't immediately answer.

"How many?!" the senator shouted.

Fox knew he shouldn't jerk her around, briefs are supposed to be brief.

"Forty seven thousand, five hundred and one."

She smiled. "Don't jerk me around, Doctor."

"Senator, Doctor Warrington, I wouldn't dream of giving you false facts. You asked me how many people died because of this project, that number is forty seven thousand, five hundred and one. I have a photographic memory, I just copy and paste."

"Cute."

"No, really. It's kind of cool."

"Do the math."

"Out loud? I delivered the report, all the facts are there."

"Well let's see that photographic memory in action."

Fox hesitated.

"Is there a problem, doctor?" she asked.

"I'm just not sure what it is you want..."

"I want to know..."

"Oh, Please!" Harris interrupted her. "These were death row inmates." He rolled his eyes. "Can we get on with the rest of our business now, Cheryl?"

"Are you screwing me, Jack?" Senator Warrington snapped. Perhaps she'd meant to say are you screwing with me, but that wasn't what came out.

"Thank heavens, no," Congressman Harris laughed.

Some of the other delegates dared to laugh with the congressman, and the fearless bodyguards smiled. The room literally got brighter for a moment.

Warrington jumped in with both feet, splashing the goodwill from the room. "Then address me as Senator."

Fox sighed. She'd lost it, it was too late for a real argument; her train of thought had jumped it's tracks. Fox wasn't even the object of her ire anymore; it had been misdirected onto the foil, the jester, the clown. Fox knew it was Harris's job to confuse people like the ex-surgeon general. He'd been purposefully assigned by Clarke to lighten things up, should too much integrity or responsibility be called for. Fox thought she looked as if she might walk out, but she was too angry to leave.

"Could we project this transmission at an enemy?" Senator Clarke asked.

The delegates leaned forward.

"Could it be used as a weapon?" Clarke restated.

"It doesn't work that way. Everyone would need to be holding signal amplifiers. You need the gateway, and it would need to work, which it doesn't. Besides, we lost all our research. We're back at square one."

"You expect us to believe there weren't any backups?" a banking delegate asked.

"We lost everything. The back-up servers burned all over the world. We lost one in London, one in New Delhi, two in China."

"You had backups in China?" Harris fumed.

Clarke held up his hand to quell the frustration. "You lost everything? Except your personal amplifier?" Senator Clarke challenged Doctor Fox.

Andrew lifted the device from its place on the table. "It's scrap metal," he said.

"That's our property," Harris said.

"Are you sure you want it?" Fox asked.

"I vaguely recall something about shared abilities?" Clarke asked, decisively changing the subject.

"Ah, the talent thingy," Fox said.

"Talent thingy?" Clarke said.

"Technical term." Fox shrugged.

"Such as," Clarke asked.

"Say guy X knows how to speak Chinese, suddenly guy Z can too."

"They were reading each others' minds?" Harris asked.

"They were accessing each others' leaning centers, not memory. Everyone thinks memory is where the human mind would overlap, but not at all. The brain is most similar in how it stores acquired skills, language, mathematics."

"That's still mind reading," Clarke said.

"It was more like borrowing each others' power tools, if you need an analogy."

Harris pointed at the prototype sitting on the table. "Can you read our minds with that thing?" he asked.

Fox smiled. "I can read your mind without it, Congressman. It seems you really want to get to know Senator Warrington better." A few laughs were heard. "Senator Clarke wants a gin and tonic, and that guy wants a club sandwich."

The whole room was laughing.

Fox continued, "For the record, they could not, and I cannot, read minds. We had some speaking in foreign languages, but since you sent me condemned criminals, what we really saw was a staggering rise in escape

attempts, and violent attacks on guards. I objected then, I'm objecting now. To be fair, you people or your direct superiors are responsible for the deaths, and the failure of this project."

No one spoke.

After a considerable silence, Fox continued. "At any rate, shortly after the manifestation of unlearned skills, the headaches started, followed by hemorrhaging from the eyes nose and ears, sometimes seizures. "

"Did a lot of the subjects have headaches?" Senator Miller asked, having remained quiet until now.

"We all did." Fox answered.

"What do you mean? You, the assistants, everybody?" Miller inquired.

"All of us, yes. We were all connected," Fox answered.

"And when it exploded, where were you?" Clarke asked.

"I was traveling."

"What aren't you telling us?" Harris asked.

"How much time do you have?"

"Tell us when you first thought there might be a problem."

"As soon as you changed this project from a volunteer status to an execution alternative. I tried to shut the project down several times. I spoke with each of you at length about it. An hour prior to the explosion, I spoke with you, Senator Miller. You insisted on waiting a week to shutter the facility."

Senator Clarke leaned forward, "Did you learn those skills you mentioned?"

Fox shook his head. "I personally didn't manifest any new abilities. It might have been because I was first, but I also didn't spend a lot of time with the test subjects. I was mostly occupied with changes, improvements to the source code."

The room remained silent for a few moments.

"Gentlemen, I have nothing further. Any other questions for me?"

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Back in the canyon, Evan stood before the fearless Ashley, arm raised overhead. If he swung, Ash knew she was getting hit. There was no way she could move fast enough, but she was betting he wouldn't hit a defenseless girl.

Doug and Jamie, the camouflaged commandos, leapt from their place in the deep grass. "Attack!" Doug yelled.

The ambush exploded around them; clods of dirt and grass were hurled toward Evan and his gang of hoverboarders. Loud cracks were heard, as the

springs of their toy guns slapped plastic on plastic, rocketing yellow bee-bees that buzzed as they cut through the air. Ashley could see them streaking past, hissing like mutant insects on steroids.

While the ambush was psychologically something of a success, the older kids escaped major damage to the head and neck. Thankfully, no one lost an eye. The guerrilla commandos were sticking to the traditional hit-and-run tactics, but that meant they'd just get picked off, one at a time, by the air-mobile adolescents.

Ash looked for Geoff and Jack, gesturing for them to back out of the impending battle. The teens would rally, and someone would be crying soon. She hoped, but doubted it would be Evan.

Evan saw his quarry attempting to escape, and stepped back up, getting in Ashley's face again. "Hey! Where do you think you're you going?"

Doug and Jamie stepped in to protect her, their hornet rifles leveled at Evan's chest.

"Leave her alone," Doug said.

Faced with the plastic guns, Evan stalled in his advance.

"She can stand up for herself," Evan countered.

"She's a girl!" Jamie yelled, aiming for Evan's face.

"It'll be your last mistake," Evan promised.

Doug raised his rifle too, aiming for the eyes. "You'll be blind!"

"Is that a fact?" Evan asked.

Ash noticed Bobby, Evan's younger brother, among the commandos who'd come to their rescue.

Evan, desperate to escape Doug and Jamie without backing down, followed her line of sight, and seeing Bobby, went berserk. "What the hell? Are you on their side?" he yelled.

"We're just playing, Evan."

Doug and Jamie slowly lowered their rifles.

"Playing, huh?" the big brother snapped. "What's the matter with you?"

"If it weren't for me, they would have shot you for real," Bobby said.

"Is that a fact?" Evan yelled.

Jamie's finger squeezed the trigger, and the hornet jumped in his hand. Three bee-bees streaked past Evan's face.

Evan jumped, scared and stumbling.

Doug laughed.

Evan growled, and shot toward them.

Doug and Jamie burst into laughter, and ran from the enraged teen. They showed no real fear, and effortlessly dodged the angry Evan. The air was

again filled with laughter.

Until, without warning, a dozen huge red laser beams filled the canyon with a crimson glow. The beams formed a giant ring of light, stretching up into the sky, slowly turning clockwise.

Someone had fallen from the city above; a rescue operation was underway. The red light let passing vehicles know that the coast guard or EMTs were chasing a jumper, hoping to catch him or her before their imminent impact with the unforgiving ground below. The kids were stunned silent, their battle abandoned.

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## Chapter 9 – Alexander Pierce

### A few moments earlier...

As Fox and the assembled delegates prepared to end the briefing, a voice made itself heard “Excuses don't interest me.”

Pierce stood, impeccably dressed behind the massive cases crowding his table. The young man looked rather effeminate, his long hair hung in his face; luxuriant, fashion-model hair. "I was made to understand that this briefing concerned items of merit." He grinned wolfishly at Dr. Fox. "What about the prototype?"

"What about it?" Fox replied.

"Well, Dr. Fox, I agree with you. I read your report, all twenty five hundred pages of it. I agree that it was an absurd insult to you personally, and to your work, for the assembled members to have so grossly perverted the basis of your study by sending you condemned criminals."

Pierce continued, "I find myself torn. You see, I also agree with the senators; that prototype should be our property. We paid for it, in money and in blood. You need to turn it over."

"It's worthless," Fox stammered. "It's a paperweight."

"Fine, then. It's our worthless paperweight. What's all the noise?"

"You could hurt yourself. As a doctor, I cannot give this to you. But if you want to come up here, and steal my personal property, that's on you."

Pierce walked forward, his hands folded behind his back, his eyes locked on Andrew's. "Dr. Fox, I charge you with treason and fraud."

"Treason and fraud?" Fox replied, rolling his eyes. "That's a new one."

Before Fox could stop him, Pierce picked up the slender hunk of metal. He was wearing gloves.

"This device is now officially taken into custody as evidence. We had a contract. You agreed to produce the interface, and after a couple of minor setbacks, you want to give up? I don't think so. You will try again, or you will



be tried for treason."

Secretary of Defense Croswell stood up. "Dr. Fox works for the United States Government. You don't give him orders, I do. You don't get to try him for treason, I do. You don't have a contract or investment rights. You get what I give you, and I give you my word; if you don't put that down, you won't leave this room alive, you deluded brat."

Pierce didn't move.

Croswell continued, "Your drunkard of a father should have sent David, like I told him to, not some cock-sucking pansy-ass elf. Take your gloves off, I dare you," the secretary taunted him. "You won't touch it. You're a coward, is why. A no-good, one-way, dumb-ass little sally."

Pierce smiled and tossed the prototype to the Secretary.

Several people gasped. The flat rectangle hung in the air between the men. It seemed to move in slow motion.

Out of nowhere Dr. Fox caught the prototype, only inches before it reached the Secretary's face.

"You called me a traitor, a liar and a cheat?" Dr. Fox said.

Pierce's only reply was a scowl.

"Let's settle this the old fashioned way," Fox said.

Pierce smiled. "Pistols on the balcony?"

"Winner takes the prize." Fox held up the prototype. "What do you say?"

Director Stanwood stood up. "You idiots can kill each other on your own time. The rest of us have business to attend to." He gestured for his assistants to collect the cash, and exited the hall. With the money gone, the briefing was definitively over.

Croswell nodded to Fox, "I'd love to stick around, but you know I can't be a party to this. Good luck, Andrew."

"Whatever happens, it's a perfectly legal duel. Clarke will fill you in on the details." Dr. Fox smiled at Clarke. "Won't you, Senator?"

Clarke nodded, giddy with Shakespearean malice. He hated Fox and Pierce both. He, Miller, and Harris cackled like hyenas, following lions.

Moments later, Dr. Fox faced young Alexander outside the clamshell, on the building's exterior patio. The remaining delegates watched from behind the bulletproof glass. Andrew was disappointed. There were a couple of guests he'd have happily winged or even point-blank shot, if afforded the opportunity.

Andrew set the prototype on an empty table. "Just so we both know where it is."

Pierce nodded and peeled the glove from his right hand. He removed his

coat, exposing a modified version of the standard issue Light 9 handgun, with an extended barrel and compensator. He wore the gun low on his thigh, an easy draw. The chrome reflected glittering bits of light as he shifted his weight.

Andrew's holster was much higher, on his belt, a much more difficult draw and impossible to beat Pierce's hip-hugger. As kids, everyone had practiced, but few adults actually found themselves in an honest-to-goodness showdown.

Fox knew he wasn't drunk. Why then did he feel drunk? He hadn't taken any pills that day. He wasn't on pills just now. Andrew decided he was getting some pills if he survived this mess.

Fox suddenly found it exceedingly difficult to breathe. His face felt flush, his throat, wet and ragged. His collar was too tight. He could hear his heartbeat, ringing in his ears, slamming through his head like a bell. Fox realized his blood pressure was through the roof. He stumbled as the wind threatened to throw him off the balcony, and plunged to his knees. He took a deep breath, shook his head and tried to level out. 'Keep the mind level, and the whole world stays level,' he said to himself.

"I'm just gonna take off my coat." Andrew crashed back into the briefing room. His jacket fell to the floor. He heard his colleagues following him as he rushed toward the bathroom. Fox checked to see that he was entering the men's room, and the next thing he knew, he'd split his head open on the tile floor.

Pierce remained on the balcony. He had no real desire to see Fox shot. What he wanted was right here. Slowly, calmly, he walked over to it. The wind whipped his clothes. He picked up the prototype with his gloved hand. His back to the glass, Pierce tossed it to his bare right hand. When he touched it, he froze. Then he fell forward, hit the railing and went over.

Several emergency vehicles hovered alongside Fuji Dozo. Immediately a halo team headed off in pursuit of the falling chairman. They reached his angle of descent, cutting off the municipal EMTs and coast guard. They deployed life-lights; twelve hoverdisks that locked into position, and split the sky with four-foot-wide beams of harmless red laser light, tracking Pierce from his current elevation to his projected impact point, on the canyon floor. The rescue team streaked through the air toward the citizen.

\*\*\*

In the canyon, the crimson pillars had transfixed the children. "It's a

jumper! They're trying to rescue a jumper!" someone yelled.

High above, the kids spotted the jumper, Chairman Pierce, fourth gate citizen, and heir to a vast fortune, should he survive to enjoy it.

The circle was twenty meters across, the pillars growing fatter as the three rescue agents, HALO operatives, or Chasers, gained on the plummeting Pierce. A fall from the median city height of three miles, or fifteen thousand feet, took a minute and a half at terminal velocity.

You could count on being rescued by the coast guard from any elevation of seven thousand or better, lower than that, and your chances diminished drastically. The coast guard and EMTs caught ninety percent, but Pierce was clearly that tenth man. The chasers just couldn't reach him.

Every time the agents got close, Pierce pulled away, as though he were moving under his own power. They agents lost their chance when their altimeters triggered their deceleration kites, halting them well above the earth's surface.

Chairman Alexander Pierce, twenty-three years old, crashed into the canyon floor with a loud smack. His blood splashed everywhere. The body itself bounced four feet upon impact. Alexander's wristwatch, his phone, his gun, all his heavy personal effects bounced free of pockets, appendages or holsters.

The prototype landed at Ashley's feet. She immediately recognized it as the secret device her father had been carrying around at home. Without a second thought, she bent over and picked it up. In her hand, she looked at it closely. She noted the single button on the top right side of the rectangle. She didn't press the button but suddenly realized something was terribly wrong.

Everything was still. No one moved. There was no sound, no wind. The trees stood perfectly still, nothing disturbed their leafy green arms. The tall grasses and knee-high ferns held their posture as stiffly as any soldier in formation. Overhead, the Halo agents hung suspended above the children.

The red beams weren't beams at all, but rather pulses. There were huge gaps where the light alternated, the pulses themselves descending slowly, creeping toward the earth. Everything else was frozen. Geoff was nearby, tiny spots of red on his skin. Pierce's blood had hit everything in the immediate area.

The moment stretched into infinity. Ashley wondered if she could move. She was able to use her eyes, and turn her head, but when she tried to lift her arm, it felt as if it were made of molten steel. Struggling, she raised her hand and looked at the prototype. It was exactly like the one her father had at home. In that instant, she knew, he was somehow involved. She felt it had come to

her, through this fallen man.

Ash looked over to Geoff, she reached out for his hand. When she touched him, he woke up, coming alive into the frozen moment with her.

"Geoff, Geoff, look at me."

He did.

"We have to get Jack, and get out of here."

Geoff looked at the item in Ashley's hand. "What's that?" he asked. "Is that Dad's?"

Ashley pointed to the sky, the agents hung in place, their arrival postponed.

"Who are they?" Geoff asked.

"We have to go!" Ash pulled Jack's leash from around her shoulders.

"But ..." Geoff was awestruck.

"Mom says you have to do what I say," she reminded him.

"Only in emergencies," he answered.

"What do you call this?" Ashley snapped.

Geoff looked at Jack. "Will he wake up if I touch him?" he asked.

"I don't know, you did," Ash answered.

"You do it." Geoffrey stepped back.

Ash reached out, her hand just a few inches from Jack's coat.

"Ash, how do we know, I mean ..."

Ashley stroked his neck and spoke to him. "Jack, wake up, boy. We have to go, come on, wake up."

Suddenly the animal was breathing again. Ashley clipped the leash to the choke chain. Their voices had sounded normal, but the chain rattled eerily in the frozen time.

Jack began to growl. In weird, slow motion, he turned and snapped at Ash. He bared his teeth, dropped his front paws, and growled at the children.

"Jack! No!" Ashley said.

Ash and Geoff seemed to be moving in real time while everyone else remained frozen. Jack's ears, as floppy as they were, went back, and then he was gone, sprinting away from them, the leash ripped from Ashley's hand. He had growled in slow motion, but now, running away from them, he seemed to be moving in fast forward. The beagle raced away from the children, his leash dragging through the brush.

Ash and Geoff raced after him, running at their own speed in the absurd frozen-time. They weren't able to keep up with the puppy. Ashley was faster than Geoff, but pulling him along, she was far too slow to catch the feral pet.

"I'll go get him and be right back." Ashley didn't wait for a response, a

second later she was sprinting after Jack.

\*\*\*

In the observation lab, Mr. Reid and the rest of the supervisors were dumbfounded. Their internal feeds from Dr. Fox had gone down; they knew nothing of what was going on aboard Fuji Dozo. When Pierce fell, their first information of the event had been from Ashley and Geoffrey, when they saw the massive laser beams illuminate the canyon floor.

When Pierce hit the ground, both Ashley and Geoffrey's eyes had tracked the body. They saw the objects that bounced from his corpse. Mr. Reid, Major Ross and the others watched Ashley's field of vision as it tracked the prototype, from Pierce's hand to land at her feet. They watched Ashley reach down to pick it up, and her system went black. A split second later the system monitoring Geoffrey went offline too.

"That's no accident," Reid said.

Ross chuckled and returned to his desk at the back of the small lab. "No accident, huh? Should we call the doctor?"

"For curiosity's sake alone, I suppose," Reid said. "But if that was his amplifier, I don't know how he'll answer."

\*\*\*

## Chapter 10 – Frequency Scrubbing

The ringing in his head startled Fox. He woke to discover he was lying on the bathroom floor. Someone was shaking him; he was helped to his feet. In the mirror, blood ran from a gash above his eyebrow.

Fox scanned his consciousness for the Micronix operating system. It wasn't there. He ran his hands over his pockets.

"Pierce took it," someone said, correctly presuming Fox was looking for the prototype.

"He fell off the balcony," another added.

"We saw a rescue team go after him, but..."

Fox leaned on the sink and looked into the mirror. He felt nauseous. The Micronix provided visual and audio enhancement. Without it, Fox found his eyes had grown weak. Focusing was difficult and increased his nausea.

Without his mind supported by the familiar comfort of the operating system, Fox found himself on foreign ground. He forced himself to open his eyes, and focus. He realized this was the first time in almost thirty years that he'd seen anything with his own eyes.

He thought of the Metachron, it was still at his home, but the second prototype was dangerous. He didn't want to touch it.

A second later he was racing into a stall, the contents of his stomach splashing into water and white porcelain.

\*\*\*

Back among the other kids, time never actually stopped. Pierce crashed into the canyon floor with a devastating smack. There was blood everywhere.

The trio of kite bound agents descended slowly toward the scene.

Bobby, Evan and Doug, discovered the items tumbling to rest at their feet. Evan picked up Pierce's phone. Doug retrieved a bloody wristwatch, the band had snapped. Bobby, having approached the group during the argument with

his brother, found Mr. Pierce's fully loaded revolver at his feet.

The items all contained significant amounts of terillium, encoded by the prototype. The amplifiers had many peculiar attributes, one being a tendency to bleed data into nearby items. The upload equations, which Dr. Fox had never been able to fully eradicate, had formatted large chunks of the watch, revolver and phone.

Eventually Fox had accepted it as a built in redundancy, designed to take advantage of the product's environment. He had never had the courage to accept the tendency for what it truly was. He blamed himself. Computers had no problem forgetting things; it was people who did that. Fox refused to consider the possibility that maybe the Micronix didn't want to forget the ability to upload backup copies of its operating system. After all, the desire to continue, to extend existence, survival was the linchpin of intellectual evolution.

So the interface transformed common items into network nodes, boosting its capacity. This hadn't been a problem at the facility, until the end. As common objects only held trace amounts of writable terillium, half-images and missing data packets were the predictable result. The gun, the phone, the watch, each had been infected with a portion of the system, yet incomplete in significant ways.

Jamie was closest to the action, standing behind Doug. He never saw Ash leave; she just vanished. After the man crashed into their midst, Ash, Geoff and Jack simply vanished. Evan and Doug picked things up off the ground, and started to freak out.

Doug collapsed into seizures; his eyes rolled up in his head, his muscles convulsed violently, his mouth foamed. Evan stood perfectly still for a moment, but then also collapsed. His eyes rapidly shooting back and forth, he vomited a foul green mess.

After Bobby picked up the revolver, everything happened in slow motion. Evan and Doug were falling, tilted over the earth in an absurd defiance of gravity and moving so slowly. Their faces and hands blurred before Bobby's eyes. It hurt his brain to look at them. Above him, he found the agents suspended in the air, drifting downward, slowly but steadily, only twenty feet away now.

Bobby glared at them and raised the handgun. He fired three times, and scored three hits as they fell in slow motion. The other kids looked at Bobby, confused. Bobby looked over at Evan, who was lying on his back,

convulsing, the muscles of his body twitching uncontrollably. Bobby turned and walked from the glen, staring at the gun.

Each of the agents was struck; the first fell against his mast, clutching it, taking it into the ground at a sprint. The other two fell, dangling at the end of the four-foot leash, their kites pin-wheeling behind them, landing on the fern covered ground as gently as a parent putting a toddler to bed.

In pursuit of Jack, Ashley had also lost sight of Geoff. She realized she was only adding to her troubles by chasing after the dog, and went back for her brother. By the time she reached him, Geoffrey was already terrified, stumbling along and crying. Ash put the prototype in her pocket and hugged him. They were exhausted, sweaty, scared and tired. Ashley held her little brother until he quit sobbing.

After a couple of moments, the sniffing stopped and Geoff was okay. They were on a shady section of trail, and the sound of the leaves in the wind was calming. The tranquil summer breeze felt good on Ashley's back.

Ash realized that time was no longer frozen. The wind blew and the trees moved, speaking to the children in their hushed yet open tones. She didn't have a watch to check, but the forest hadn't moved when she was holding the prototype. She put her hand into her pocket, touching the object. Nothing changed. The breeze continued, and the trees swayed.

"We have to find Jack," Ash said to the wet-eyed boy.

Geoff nodded and together they set off down the trail.

\*\*\*

In the observation lab, suddenly Ash and Geoff's systems came back online. Both children were experiencing significant adrenalin rushes, elevated heart rates, blood pressure and all the other typically predicted physical symptoms. Mr. Reid and Mr. Samuel immediately reached out to their control panels, and attempted to balance the children's systems.

"I'm not getting any response," Reid said.

"Same here, no control," Samuel said. "We've got eyes only."

"We saw this on Red series. What was our protocol to reestablish?" Major Ross asked.

"We lost the first one, and had to reinstall the receivers on all the tanked models."

"That's not really an option here," Ross said.

"With Astral they sent Taylor out into the field."



"He went out on his own," Ross said.

"He was successful," Reid said.

"Yeah, well, Astral wasn't carrying an amplifier, so we're in uncharted territory. We'll leave it up to the Doc. For now, we're eyes only. Are the recorders working?"

"We're streaming, record is fine.

Mr. Reid, Mr. Samuel and Major Ross watched the afternoon sunlight fade through Ash and Geoffrey's eyes as they continued to search for Jack.

\*\*\*

Back in the glen, Jamie tried to kick the watch from Doug's hand, but the convulsions had locked his fist tight around it. He looked as if he were being electrocuted.

That was when the gunshot agents stood up. They wore bulletproof suits and were strapped with a variety of packs. Their helmets had sealed oxygen, and behind their visors, a twelve-channel image translator identified everything in their surroundings.

The agents checked their suits; no rips no tears. The bulletproof material had held, and they gave each other thumbs up. They hadn't even been injured. The kids watched them in stunned silence.

The tall agent raised his weapon and spoke, "Sinusoids."

The other two agents also raised their weapons. They sprayed a thick green gas across the canyon floor. The kids fell to the ground, unconscious. Evan and Doug's convulsions stopped. The agents pried Pierce's watch and phone from their hands.

"Let's get on with it," the tall one said.

"What hit us?" the female asked, her flight suit made gender recognition difficult.

"We had one heavy-atom item during most of the fall, but I think it might have multiplied. The Doctor said something about it infecting other devices, like the watch, or that phone."

"Or that gun," she said.

"The bullets, that's what hit us. They were charged, super-dense," the third agent pointed out.

"Where's the original?" the female asked. "I've got nothing on my scanner."

"Hold on." The tall agent hit a switch on his headset, calling his home base. "Yes, Sir. I'm reviewing the recording now, sir. Time code: 12:37:22:17. Yes sir, frame eighteen she's gone. Yes, sir, copy that."

"What about the revolver, sir? Copy. You want us to... Copy sir. Out."

The tall agent turned and addressed his colleagues. "He says we have to find the bullets."

The subordinate agents looked at each other, their expressions hidden under the shiny visors.

"It was a revolver right?" the third one asked.

"I see her," the female said. "Girl vanishes on eighteen, and at frame twenty-six, the little boy disappears."

"And at 23:06 the dog vanishes. One, two, three," the other male added. "That's the prototype, for sure."

"Should one of us pursue?"

"No, they're sending additional units. We're RTB, [*Return To Base*]. Jesus, I recognize them, those are Fox's kids," the tall agent said.

"Guess there was a reason we were on standby," the third agent said.

"He's never left anything to chance," the team leader said.

"I've got the kid who shot us, it was a revolver, so there are no shells to worry about, just the bullets."

They scanned the ground. "Use your thermals. They'll still be pretty hot."

"I got one," the female said.

"So do I, I've got mine."

"All right, here's the third. Let's sack them, and get on with the business." The lead agent removed a black pouch of non-reflective cloth. The watch, phone and three spent slugs were dropped inside and sealed up.

The trio pulled off their packs, and each assembled strange rifle-like devices, but instead of a proper barrel they had a radar dish and a scanner. A clamp swung from the bottom, morbidly empty.

"Either of you got a Meyer?" the tall agent asked.

"No, they gave me a Morelet," the female answered. "It was all they had."

"Shit man, last week I was a noodle-cooking Mexican hat," the third agent laughed.

"No way, they still got those things in service?" the tall one laughed.

"Palm Springs it was all we had for the first year," the female said. "Fucking ghastly."

Her colleagues laughed, and shook their heads, rolling their eyes behind the tinted visors.

"Seriously, it fucks you up, plowing someone with a goddamn sombrero."

"What have you got? You get a Meyer?" the third agent asked their leader.

"I don't think we've got any portable models out here, which is kind of hard to believe, but what the fuck, Morelet it is. Sucks to be them."

The tall agent walked over to Doug and rolled him onto his stomach. With the dish-rifle slung around his neck, the agent grabbed a handful of Doug's hair and pulled him up into a snake-like position. He locked the collar around the boy's neck and centered the scope on the back of his head.

Letting the weapon take the boy's weight, the agent leaned into the sling, sighted in and charged the dish. To scrub a person of the Micronix infection, a blast of electricity had to be delivered to the entire organ at once, effectively rebooting the system.

As the charge built and the audible hum rose in pitch, the agent held the young man's skull in his sights. When the rifle chirped, he fired.

Doug was instantly awake, screaming. The initial blast was loud, as a mini bolt of lightning was forced through the child's head, an excruciating experience, but after a few seconds, it was over. Doug's body emptied its bowels and projectile vomited across the canyon floor. The agent unhooked the collar and let him slide to the ground.

"The Meyer coefficient is so much less invasive."

"What are you going to do?" the third agent shrugged and blasted Evan.

"You have to admit, three seconds of Morelet, beats getting properly fucked with a sombrero. A whole ten seconds? That really has to hurt."

The female agent blasted Jamie. Soon all the kids in the canyon had been scrubbed. They bagged up Alexander's shattered body and secured it to the lead agent's kite.

The agents hopped onto their kite boards and left the canyon for higher elevation.

Another two-man recovery team picked up Bobby's trail. He still carried the revolver in his hand and hadn't gone too far. They came down on him from behind, firing the sinusoids while airborne, flooding the path Bobby walked.

The gas enveloped him, and Bobby hit the ground with a thud. He hadn't seen them coming and couldn't have fired the gun anyhow. In a fit of curiosity, he'd removed the shells from the revolver and pocketed them.

Later that evening, Doug, Jamie, Evan and the rest of the children

individually woke, groggy and confused. Gradually they made their soiled way home, unable to remember much of what happened over the past few days, let alone that afternoon.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 11 – Jack and Bobby

After spending the remainder of the day looking for Jack, Ashley and Geoff found themselves at the far edge of the forested canyon. They had reached the northern tip of Beverly Hills, the flat expanse of the Los Angeles basin stretching away from them.

Ashley and Geoff stared out at the city; shocked by the lights, traffic and swell of pedestrians. They were allowed to play close to home, and while they pushed the envelope in the forest, the children had never dared to hop the gate and cross into the forbidden-city.

Some pedestrians noticed their abrupt appearance, looking at them as if they were some wild forest creatures. Streaked with dirt and sweat, with bits of leaf in their hair, Ash pulled Geoff back into the forest.

"But Ash, what if Jack's out there?" Geoff said.

Ash thought of how she'd last seen the dog, he'd been practically rabid. She was afraid he'd gotten his leash caught in a thicket and strangled. Ashley thought she'd been listening closely, but the noise of the encroaching city had long since drowned out any sounds made by a panicked dog. Ash began to despair they wouldn't find him.

Geoff tugged at her arm, looking back at the city. He seemed determined that Jack had gone that way. Ashley refused to entertain him. She'd been overwhelmed by the people and the traffic. She always wondered why people stayed out of the forest. She was glad they did.

Ashley looked around the trail. The tall trees formed natural arches overhead, light spilled down gently, and the breeze rustled their limbs. Birds chirped and fluttered about with butterflies. That was when she saw it. Jack's leash, tangled in a thicket, but there was no Jack.

"Geoff," Ashley said, pointing to the leash.

"Oh, that's his... JACK! JACK!" he yelled into the darkening forest.

It was getting late, closer to rush hour, and the sounds of the city traffic intruded, drowning out his call.

"Ash, we have to find him! He could be lost or scared!"

Geoff was beginning to melt down. Ashley could see it coming.

"Come on," she said. Together they picked the cord out of the brush.

"He's out there, Ash." Geoff stared out into the city.

"No, Geoff. He's a smart dog. He'll go home. I bet he'll be waiting for us. Come on, we have to go."

"Ashley, please," he cried.

Unable to argue or insist he come with her, Ashley put her arms around him. She led him away from the city, back uphill. Ashley walked at his pace, and Geoff stayed with her. Going up was so much harder than going down. To his credit, Geoffrey didn't complain.

Now Ashley understood why people didn't come into their part of the forest. The steep climb was a natural barrier. They watched their shadows grow long under the afternoon sun.

At the top of the slope, back on familiar ground, Geoffrey got a second wind.

"I miss him already," he said.

"I know. Me too," Ashley said.

The pair got home just before dark. They'd wandered far across the canyon and came up the shallow side of the neighborhood, surprising their parents when they entered through the front door.

Only the faintest light was hanging in the air, thirty seconds later it was gone. Dinner was already on the table. Ashley's mom took the leash without question as to Jack's whereabouts. Ash and Geoff were told they were filthy and chased upstairs to wash. No one made any jokes.

Pierce's blood, which had splattered all over Ashley, had either crusted off or faded in the failing light. It wasn't noticed until Ashley saw it in the sink; the first handful of water came back pink against the porcelain. The second was red.

Geoff turned to look outside and saw Jack, scratching his ear in the back yard. He screamed the dog's name and sprinted from the bathroom. Ash listened to him bounding down the stairs, yelling the dog's name all the way.

Jack seemed normal, barked normal and wrestled with Geoffrey. All normal. Ashley was glad the beagle was back. Once she got over Geoff's scream, she also realized, with a smile, that she had the bathroom to herself.

\*\*\*

Bobby Dunkirk woke near a puddle of vomit he instinctively recognized to be his own. He sat up, coughed and shook his head. The revolver was gone. He stumbled to his feet and reached into his pocket.

Bobby pulled out his fist and opened it to reveal six shiny brass shells. Three were hollow and empty, spent. The other three were filled with the heavy copper-coated rounds, artifacts of an ancient time. Only the richest citizens carried revolvers and old-school bullets.

The bullets held Bobby's gaze, speaking in a wordless language, alien concepts filling his mind. After several minutes of silent communication, he pocketed the heavy chunks of metal and made his way home.

\*\*\*

During dinner Ashley was transfixed by the black rectangle lying next to her father's plate. She looked at him. He was eating, happy and calm.

Ash was tempted to pull out the uncomfortable hunk of black metal in her own pocket, but didn't. She remembered his order, never to touch it, under any circumstances. Ash looked at his rectangle, it was subtly different from the one she'd found.

After dinner, alone in her room with the door closed, Ashley sat at her desk. Staring at the overhead clock, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the prototype. The clock didn't stop. She stared at it for a long time, almost a minute. The second hand never even ticked slowly; it just kept cruising, perfectly.

Ash looked at the device. It was almost identical to her father's. Ash noticed that the button placement was just a little different. This rectangle had some curving to it, and gently beveled edges. When she looked at it closely, she saw it also had dozens of seams.

The button was hard; it took some effort to press it down into the device. She wrapped both hands around it and used one thumb atop the other to force the button down. She was met with a loud crack of metal, as a wicked-sharp blade snapped out through the end.

Ashley looked at the clock. It kept ticking. Then she looked up to see her father enter the room.

"So, it found you," he said.

"What?" Ashley asked, rattled.

"I knew sooner or later it would. I tried to stop it, but I guess there really was nothing I could do."

"What are you taking about?" Ashley asked.

Her father blinked.

Ashley held up the knife. "What is this?" she asked.

"That's a knife," he replied.

"Is it yours?" she asked, holding it flat in her hand.

"No, this is mine," he said, producing the item she'd seen him with at dinner. "Where did you get that?" he asked.

"What?"

"Where did you get that?"

"It fell out of the sky."

"Really?"

"There was a man attached to it."

"That sounds more likely." Fox laughed and absent-mindedly fingered the blue stained scar over his eye.

"What is it?" Ashley asked.

"It's a tool, a weapon, an eating utensil. It's up to you, really," he said.

Ashley looked down at it.

Later that night, Ash abruptly sat up in bed, in her pajamas, the lights off. She'd had a nightmare. It was after midnight. She stood up beside her bed. The moonlight spilling through the windows lit the room well enough for her to look around. Nothing seemed different. She listened to the house. She didn't hear anything.

She thought about earlier that night, trying to remember what had happened. Her eyes were drawn to the first drawer of her desk. She remembered getting ready for bed and looking at the object. The button hadn't done anything at all. It wasn't a knife, and her father had never entered the room.

Ashley remembered, she'd taken it into his study and asked him what it was. He said it was a pocket drive. He had one and showed her how it plugged into his computer. He never reached for hers or showed the slightest interest in it.

Ashley stared at the desk. She crossed the room and opened the center drawer. The object was lying right where she'd left it. She picked it up. It was heavy and serious. The clock didn't stop. She pressed the button. She pressed it hard. It did nothing. She pulled a pencil out from her desk, discarded it for a tougher metal pen and jammed down on the button. A port at the front end of the device opened up.

She jammed the button with the pen a second time and with a loud rusty thwack, the blade popped out. It was shiny black, serrated near the hilt, grooved with a polished silver blood gutter. Ashley stared at it. She knew, without a doubt, she had never seen it before, not in her waking life, anyhow.

The button had risen up, even with the smooth surface of the case again. Ashley pressed it a second time. It went down easily, and the blade



retracted with another crack.

Ashley placed the knife back in the drawer. It looked out of place, surrounded by her pens, pencils, erasers and more-feminine possessions. She stared at it for a long moment before sliding the drawer closed.

\*\*\*

### **Ashley's Journal - 06/29**

I don't know why my father carries around a knife, or why I'm having nightmares about it. Or even better, how does a knife make you hallucinate? And if I'm going crazy, why bother writing it down?

\*\*\*

An hour or so earlier, Bobby arrived home, entering the vast white structure through the kitchen. He made his way over the white tiled floors and past white paneled walls to his private bathroom, next to his bedroom. Bobby's bathroom was decorated with shades and hints of blue.

He stood the six bullets in a single, horizontal line; the copper coated loads on the left, the three, empty, fired shells, on the right. He spent a few minutes just watching them, first focusing on them and then on their reflection in the mirror.

Bobby stripped out of his clothes and took a shower. When he got out, the steam had obscured the mirror, but the bullets stood gleaming. They seemed to be in tune with his soul. They calmed him and yet excited him at the same time. He felt empowered and captivated by their presence.

The boy dried himself and combed his hair, flat, back and to the side. It was how his mother did it. He didn't like it, but it was out of his eyes. Bobby flossed and brushed his teeth. Usually he avoided these chores. Tonight he did them thoroughly, exactly as they should be done.

Bobby pulled on his pajamas and a huge white terrycloth robe. He scooped up his bullets and carried them, his hands in his pockets, over to the windowsill. Seated on his bed, he stood the shells on the wooden sill. Carefully, he opened the window behind them.

Ill at ease, he moved the shells. Seeing them sitting there like that, something about it bothered him. A moment later, he found the latches securing the window screen, flipped them and pushed it out, letting it fall into the canyon below. He set the bullets back on the ledge.

Now they were arranged before the open sky; that felt right. He

watched the moonlight reflecting off their surface. He fell asleep watching them.

\*\*\*

Geoff woke later than usual. He'd slept in until almost seven-thirty. Usually he was up, fed and fully occupied by then. The house was quiet. In his pajamas, he left his room and went downstairs. He found his parents sitting quietly at the kitchen table. By the way they looked at him, it was clear something was wrong.

His mother spoke first. "Honey, Jack died in his sleep last night."

A couple of hours later, their father had finished digging a nice-sized hole at the edge of the property. The new scar across his forehead had turned red and swollen while he dug. Geoff had asked; he'd gotten it after a nasty spill on a wet bathroom floor, he'd said, which actually was the truth, if only part of it.

They put Jack in a large towel-lined wooden box, and Dr. Fox set him into the hole, which was deep. Several feet of dirt would cover the beagle's casket. Dr. Fox climbed out and asked if anyone would like to say a few words.

No one answered, so he said he'd start. "Today we bury our dear friend, Jack. He was a good dog, really a puppy still, but he was a good soul, well liked by everyone and never had a bad thing to say about anybody. We are thankful for the time he shared with us and will remember him fondly, until the end of our days."

Geoffrey leaned against his mother. Dr. Fox picked up the shovel with his blistered hands and gingerly began filling in the hole.

Geoffrey's mother led him away from the grave, over to the canopied swing. They sat in the shade as Dr. Fox shoveled in the dirt. Ashley stood beside her father. She held a small bouquet of wild flowers and watched the dirt slowly rise.

Inside, somehow, Ashley knew that it was her father's fault Jack had died. Just like she knew that he'd lied to her about the knife. Somehow, she knew he was responsible. Ashley waited until he finished filling in the hole. She set her flowers at the head of the grave as her father carried the shovel back to the shed.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 12 – Bullets and Kung Fu

### Ashley's Journal - 07/02

It's been three days since Jack died, four, since the man fell out of the sky.

Geoff stayed in back yard most of that day, but he hasn't been outside much since. He's been glued to the vid streams and net games. Otherwise, he seems fine. I bet once school starts he'll be back to his old self.

I haven't seen Doug, or Jamie, or any of the other kids who were in the canyon that day. In fact, I haven't seen anyone out since then. The neighborhood has been dead quiet.

You can feel it in the air. Doors stay closed, and blinds are pulled tight. Maybe everyone is blasting the AC, but I'm betting only tourists and strangers are down in the park now.

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On the first day after his exposure to the corrupted handgun, Bobby found himself compelled to return to the forest. He was the exception to the rule. He saw none of the other kids.

He walked all day, exploring in an ever-widening corkscrew fashion. He kept moving but never got terribly far from home.

Late in the afternoon, Bobby noticed that the bronze shell casings had tarnished, accelerated by the oils in his hands, as he fondled at least one of the six cylinders almost constantly. After returning home, Bobby approached his father, asking if they had any polishing products in the house.

Predictably his father asked, "What for?"

Bobby showed him the bullets.

Mr. Martin Dunkirk, Bobby's father, real-estate magnate and father of three, felt his chest go tight. His breath caught in his throat. He looked closely at the naked shells. He felt consumed with energy and invigorated, just by the

sight of the items in his young son's hand. After a moment, Martin didn't even know what it was that he was looking at, only that he couldn't look away.

Bobby's arm grew tired; he lowered his hand. His father stood in a daze; calm, quiet and distant. Bobby had forgotten what it was he'd asked his father for. The boy turned and left him in the hall.

Back in his bedroom, he set the shells on his windowsill and settled in, watching them with mute fascination, as his father had.

A few moments later, Mr. Dunkirk snapped out of his trance and went to his own bedroom, suddenly overcome with fatigue.

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The next day, Bobby woke, dressed, ate breakfast and slipped out of the house. His father's car was already gone. Bobby wandered down into the canyon, the bullets secure in his pocket. Before long, he'd found a couple of the other neighborhood kids and shown them the shells. Together, they stood the shells on the bottom of the slide and took seats around them.

Before long, a pair of moms noticed their children and friends all sitting quietly, staring at the foot of the slide. Naturally, they drifted over to investigate the strange phenomenon. By the time they were close enough to recognize the bullets, it was too late. They entered the shells' sphere-of-influence and quietly took seats on the wood-chip covered ground with the children.

Bobby noticed their arrival and considered the implications. He wondered if the adults would try and take his bullets. He wasn't afraid the other children might, but the presence of the two parents unnerved him. A few minutes later, Bobby rose and picked up the bullets. Several of the children rose with him, cordially smiling, but not speaking. Bobby smiled in return and walked from the slide toward the tree line a short distance away.

The crowd of children and adults peacefully followed Bobby from the playground into the overgrown forest. They made their way down the pathways, wandering from gully to glen, until Bobby found a large, shade-enconced rock.

Bobby climbed onto the rock as his disciples settled themselves around it. Bobby stood the six brass shells on the smooth surface of the broad stone. It took him a moment to align them properly, but none fell or rolled away. For the remainder of the afternoon, Bobby and his group communed with the debris - metallic flotsam, infected with a power never before encountered by modern men.

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Mr. Dunkirk grew angry and irritable after his exposure to Bobby's bullets. He left meetings early and snapped at his staff. In the middle of the afternoon, he cancelled everything on his schedule and rushed home.

Dunkirk arrived home before dark and asked after his youngest son. His older children, Evan and Anne hadn't seen Bobby, but correctly guessed that he'd gone out into the forest. Mrs. Dunkirk was not at home, so Mr. Dunkirk decided to go looking for his son and those fascinating bullets.

Martin exited through the kitchen and down the tiered balconies at the back of the house. He stopped at the landscaping shed set at the edge of the property. He hefted an old fashioned short-handled sledge. The ball of the hammer was a bit smaller than his fist, a heavy chunk of metal attached to the stout wood handle. It felt right in his hand.

Martin proceeded down into the darkening canyon. It took him the better part of two hours to stumble across Bobby and his silent entourage, sitting in the dark. He'd walked past them twice.

Quite certain they were alone; he slowly came forward. No one turned at his approach. Bobby, facing his father from atop the rock, never even raised his eyes from the bullets.

Mr. Martin Dunkirk lifted the hammer high and brought it down with a thwack into the head of the woman to his right.

In her mid-forties and slightly overweight, Rhonda Tremaine's lifeless body fell to the side, her shattered skull pulling away from Martin's hammer with a sucking sound.

Martin raised the hammer again, bringing it down on the second woman. Younger, more attractive, but just as dead, Michelle Larson crumpled to the ground. Four more times that night Mr. Dunkirk raised his hammer, crushing the skulls of the children.

When he finished, Bobby raised his eyes, meeting his father's. In that single glance, it was clear that Bobby was the master of the bullets. Martin could worship, but only with Bobby's permission.

The bullets would not permit any harm to come to their master.

The hammer slipped from Martin's grasp. Mr. Dunkirk wanted to sit with Bobby and the shells, but the corpses were in his way.

Bobby watched the reflections of moonlight on metal as his father dragged the corpses to a narrow ravine a short distance from the glen. Almost narrow enough to straddle, Martin pulled them over the edge and watched them tumble and crash forty feet to the bottom. Then he collapsed the sides of

the defile around them, filling in the makeshift grave.

Finally, Martin joined his son in their silent communication with the infected bullets. They were pleased with their ministers. Bobby would remain their caretaker, seeking out converts during the day, and Martin would return at night, to keep the congregation small. It worked for almost three whole weeks, until a previously planned family vacation upset their applecart of murder.

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### **Ashley's Journal – Monday, July 8th, 2313**

Dad's been home a lot more lately. In fact, it seems as if he's here all the time now. He even took us to see fireworks. He seems a little different, but I like it.

I've still got that thing in my desk. I didn't see any blood on it. I know it's his. It looked just like the one he had at dinner. He's got another one, but why would he have two? I haven't touched it.

Camp. Today we leave for camp. I don't know why I complained so much about this. It all feels anticlimactic now. I'm actually kind of interested. I wonder what they're going to teach us. Last summer was boring. I hope this is better.

It's weird. I noticed I haven't been writing in here much anymore. Maybe I'm out growing this?

\*\*\*

With brief goodbyes to their mother, Ash and Geoff boarded the shuttle. Dr. Fox had been summoned to Washington and left the day before. Ash and Geoff waved to their mom from the shuttle window and watched their home fade quickly into the distance. The transport was half-full, all children, all bound for the same destination.

Every summer hundreds of kids attended the camp programs at the Heart O' The City Summer Camp Facility. Geoff would be on one of the three-dozen terra-formed levels, while Ashley would be on another. New programs began each Monday and the courses rotated regularly, 'graduating' students all summer.

Ash and Geoff stayed together until forcibly separated. They didn't make a big thing of it, but when the time came, they calmly waved each other goodbye. As she watched Geoff go, Ash was overcome with a feeling of loss.

She didn't know what to do with it, so she swallowed the emotion and went to look for her quarters.

Ashley had been assigned her own room. She was the only girl in a camp of over twenty boys. She figured Geoff probably had to share, but as far as she was concerned, he was still the lucky one. As soon as their bags were stowed, the children assigned to the martial arts camp were lined up outside the main practice hall. Ashley stood in the back, so not to stand out any more than necessary.

Three instructors stood at the front of the room. The tallest prowled back and forth, not speaking, just slowly taking stock of the assigned group. Ashley guessed he was doing his two years of public service, as well as the two assistants who stood beside him.

"I am Citizen Shou. You may call me Sihing Shou. See-hing means senior student. This is Sihing Cleary and Sihing Lopez. We are here to help guide you through the challenges of the next few weeks. This is a mixed martial arts course, you will be taught many things, and you will be tested. But first, I'd like to know, do any of you have experience in the martial arts?"

About half the hands went up. Ashley didn't raise her hand, despite two previous summers of similar courses; she did not count herself as experienced.

"Now, how many of you have been hit, hard, in the face?" Sihing Shou asked.

At first several hands went up, but some were timid, uncertain.

"I mean really hard; bloody nose, fat lip, black eye. How many?"

Only a few hands remained aloft.

Shou pointed to one boy and asked, "Who hit you?"

"My brother hits me all the time," he said, pointing at his brother, standing a few spaces away.

Shou and several others laughed. Ashley noticed that the boy, however, was not laughing. She suspected he was extremely interested in how to put a stop his brother's dominance.

"And you?" Shou gestured to another boy.

"My father," came the answer.

Shou pointed again.

"A kid in my class."

"Has anyone here ever been hit while in the ring?" Shou asked.

All the hands went down.

"When you are in a fight, if you are ever in a fight, you must fight for

your life. It will be at that moment when you are weak, tired, probably very hurt, that is when you must act to save your life. We will help you get to that place and teach you how to think while you're there."

Shou walked along the front of the room. "Someone may come; an outlaw, the government, a king, they may take all of your possessions. They may steal your clothes, eat your food and burn down your house, but you can survive all of that. You may have nothing, but you will never be defenseless. Knowledge is the greatest power; it is something no one can see. It cannot be stolen or broken, and no one can take it from you.

"When you leave here, you will be in possession of new knowledge. You will know things you did not know when you arrived. You will have earned it, paid for it in sweat and blood, and it will be worth much more than money."

This was decidedly different from the other Martial Arts camps Ashley had attended; she liked it.

"This knowledge comes in the form two most valuable lessons. The first can only be studied in a controlled environment, since the lesson is about control. Every day, at three o'clock, we will have tournament style sparring matches. Everyone will participate. You can win by points, knock out, or submission, but that is not the lesson. That is just the place where you will have the experience I want you to think about.

"You see a lesson is not always learned in a single moment. It is something to be taken in, explored and contemplated. Only then does it become understood.

"The match is not the lesson, it is just the framework, but within this framework, at some point you will be hit in the face. This is a unique experience, I promise you.

"The lesson is simply this. How, after being struck, does one remain composed? Can you ignore the pain and stay focused on your own survival? Can you remain calm and aware?

"I'm not here to teach you how to hit someone, but rather, how to work through being hit. So, lesson number one is, '*Keep thinking through the pain.*'

"Now lesson two is actually much more difficult to learn. If you could master this, you would never have to learn lesson one. Number two is simple: '*Don't get hit.*'"

"Everything else we teach you is to support one of those rules. Okay, now I want you to go get changed into your warm up gear. We're going to do some stretching and a little Tai Chi."



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## Chapter 13 – The Oval Office

Dr. Fox and Secretary Crosswell entered the Oval Office, greeting the assembled directors and citizens. The President was not in the room. Fox knew the men present, but Crosswell made a round of introductions anyhow. Fox shook hands with the President's Chief of Staff, Spencer McCarthy, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of State, a few senators and Intelligence Director Stanwood. Fox sat down in the open chair, the hot seat, as it were.

Only now, instead of the Micronix device, which he had carried for over twenty years, now Fox had the Metachron in his pocket. The device was decidedly different, but his daughter had the Micronix, and he couldn't bear to take it from her.

Besides, the Metachron was perfectly adequate. It was more than adequate. In fact, the device seemed to have, or rather give him, a distinct approach.

"What the hell, Fox?" McCarthy did not sound friendly.

"How are you, Mr. McCarthy?" Fox asked.

"Good. Seems there may be one or two things you haven't mentioned to us." McCarthy got straight to it.

"Probably more than a couple," Fox said.

"We got the download from Kojima Station. It's not even the prototype that I'm interested in."

"No?" Fox asked.

"No." McCarthy answered. "You see, we pulled the in-flight data recorder from your car."

"And?" Fox asked.

"And what's this business about detonating terillium?" McCarthy asked.

"Nothing. It's just a concept."

"And two hours later the place explodes? That seems like coincidence to you?"

"No, it seems completely unrelated to me," Fox said.

"Cut the shit. You know what we want," McCarthy said.

"I suppose I do," Fox answered.

"So are you going to give it to us?" the Chief of Staff snapped.

Fox smiled, "Right here, in front of everybody? "

No one laughed or even smiled.

Fox swallowed. "It was an idea sir. It didn't work, thank god. Even if you were to introduce the transcript of the call, even if you actually could extradite Dr. Te, it was just an idea. It was never going to work."

Fox looked directly at Stanwood. "It might easier to convict me if I were actually pursuing this, that really would be treasonous."

"There would never be a trial," McCarthy smiled.

"Look, I tried with the interface. You saw what happened," Fox said.

"Try harder," McCarthy said.

"Do you realize what this cost? Not even in terms of actual human life, just in cash money? The installments were chump change. I spent more than that out of my own pocket."

"We're not asking," McCarthy said.

Fox looked the President's Chief of Staff in the eyes. "Has it occurred to you that if God wanted you to know what I know, he'd have made you smarter?"

"He didn't make you President, and I don't even think you believe in God."

Fox remained silent, his lips a tight, thin line.

"I'm going to give you a week to think this over, Doctor Fox. You start again in a week, or you say goodnight. Do you understand?"

Fox laughed. "Let me get this straight. You suspect I have this ability, and your response is to threaten me? I contributed more in eighth grade than all of you have put together. You want to lecture me? You dare? I created the cyber-tanks that ended the war. You still use the Three AM guards. I don't owe you anything, and I'm the last person you should want to threaten, let alone to try and kill. By your logic, if I had this power and you exposed yourselves as such ignorant bullies, I would be obligated, as a patriot, to kill everyone in this room."

Fox paused.

No one spoke.

"If you have evidence against me? Produce it. You consider me a threat to national security? Get a warrant. You think I'm a traitor? I am the First Patriot. I am National Security. I am the first among equals. Your job is to protect me."

Fox stood and looked over to Stanwood, "This is you, isn't it? You're still bitter and so you convinced him to try and strong-arm me?"

Fox returned his attention to Mr. McCarthy. "Sir, I regret to inform you, you've been played. When I have something worthwhile, something safe, you're the first person I'll bring it to. Until then, good day to you, sir." Fox walked from the room.

As Fox walked out he heard McCarthy say, "What's he talking about, Stanwood?" You two have history?"

Fox heard Crosswell burst into laughter.

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The camp was structured to the last minute; there wasn't a lot of time for idle talk, least of all with the girl. Ash was painfully aware of how much she stood out.

In her first match, Ashley was up against one of the more experienced boys, Scott. As soon as the whistle was blown, he leapt at her, going for a takedown. Unfortunately, he made contact with Ashley's knee and the match was abruptly ended. Scott was occupied with Shou's first lesson, while Ash, almost accidentally, practiced the second.

The next day, after two lazy punches and an awkward kick, her second opponent sprained his ankle and Ashley won by default.

During her third match, Ashley attracted the attention of her instructors. Her assigned adversary, Roger, lanky and uncoordinated, wasn't a threat to anyone but himself. It took little effort for Ashley to stay out of his reach. She let him chase her around the ring, swinging for the fences and never making contact. However, despite ample opportunity, Ashley didn't hit Roger.

Sihing Lopez was scoring the match, and at the first break, he approached Ashley. "Why don't you strike and end the round, take the point?"

Ash didn't answer. She just looked at Roger, gasping and wheezing in his corner. She wasn't even winded.

"If you don't strike, the match will end in a tie," Lopez said.

Ashley rolled her eyes.

Lopez turned and approached the Roger, who was gloriously exhausted. "Breathe. Breathe," Lopez said. "That's it. Breathe."

Ashley decided to go for the tie. She would keep the match as close as possible. She would let Roger get as close as possible, but not give up any points.

When the whistle blew, Ash walked to the center of the ring and

raised her gloves. With her toe, she traced a line across the mat, daring Roger to cross it.

Roger took the bait, but with trepidation. He raised his gloves and inched toward the line, preparing to swing.

Ashley let him come.

Finally, Roger couldn't contain himself and fired off a wild jab-hook. Ashley watched the clumsy explosion of arm, shoulder and face. Roger scrunched up his face when he punched, as if afraid that the act of punching would result in his being struck.

Ashley could see why he'd become conditioned to think that way, with such an uncoordinated throw. She let it sail past without moving more than a fraction of an inch. Punch after punch, Ashley moved as little as she could to avoid him. Before long, she was actually moving closer to his flailing fists; still he could not hit her.

Ashley's dangerous ploy began to draw spectators. The waiting or already finished competitors naturally became interested in her match and the more heads turned, the more heads turned.

Roger stepped in with a haymaker, Ashley pivoted under the strike, coming up on his unprotected backside. He spun, panicked, uncoiling as if he were a snapped and broken metal spring. She slipped out of the way.

Roger threw three jabs; Ashley dodged them, his gloves inside kissing range. Roger stepped in with a knee and a kick; Ashley effortlessly eluded him.

He lunged at her; she caught him and kept him from falling. He combined jabs, hooks and elbows; she gave him a pirouette, landing behind him and then spun twice more, just to keep him off balance.

The timer rang, that was the end of the round. Sihing Lopez laughed. There was quite a crowd gathered. During this break, Roger had a dozen coaches, but no one said anything to Ashley. Her corner was closer to the wall and outside the action. She waited alone.

For the third round, Roger got more technical, but it was too late. Everyone could tell he was exhausted. After one particularly extravagant punch, Ashley reached out and put her finger on the back of his elbow. Roger was overextended, his stance was compromised and in order to escape, he was forced to collapse forward onto the floor.

Ashley stepped back and let him wearily climb to his feet. Roger didn't raise his hands. He was beaten and knew it. He didn't want to fight anymore. He was humiliated.

Sihing Lopez waved at him, "Come on. Keep going!"

Roger just looked at the instructor.

Lopez looked at Ashley.

Ash had no intention of hitting Roger. After kneeing Scott in the face, quite by accident, she saw no reason to further facilitate Shou's brutal lessons. If he wanted people to experience pain, let him dish it out.

Lopez seemed capable of reading her thoughts, but Ashley said nothing. She stood her ground. Lopez blew the whistle, ending the third round. He awarded the win to Ashley, as Roger had forfeit the match.

\*\*\*

Dr. Fox sat at an outdoor table at the busy cafe. The warm breeze smelled of rain, flowers and coffee. The people passing by had smiles and nods for each other, the goodwill that had started with the beautiful weather spread from one person to the next.

Fox blew across the top of his cup. He didn't recognize the tall man who approached his table. Fox himself was almost six foot, but the stranger was well over that. Obviously a federal agent, he was dressed in a sharp black suit, shirt and tie. Fox saw another across the patio and two more at the far entrance.

The first agent stepped to the side. Fox thought he recognized Deputy Director Von Kalt but failed to place him as Stanwood's aide. Then Von Kalt raised the gas gun. It resembled a regular pistol, except for the large canister-like barrel.

As Von Kalt raised the weapon, his agents raised respirators to their faces. The last thing Fox remembered was the patio suddenly being flooded with dark smoke, billowing from the fat pistol.

The gas reached Fox's mind and consciousness abandoned him.

Von Kalt gestured for his men to secure the area. As he knelt next to the unconscious Dr. Fox, he noticed the gas, heavier than air, growing denser at ground level. Von Kalt tightened the straps of his respirator and searched the doctor's pockets.

Wearing blue surgical gloves, Von Kalt lightly patted the man's clothing and quickly located the object he was looking for. He reached into Fox's breast pocket and pulled out the prototype device.

Von Kalt stared at it. He knew what he was holding; the legendary interface - the single greatest item in all of mankind's history. *Was he up to the challenge? Was he worthy?*

Crouched over Dr. Fox, his back to his subordinates, Von Kalt peeled the glove from his right hand.

When the device made contact, Wolfgang felt a tingling sensation, as if everything got both warm and cold, instantly. The second thing he noticed was an utter absence of sound. The city had suddenly gone quiet.

He had heard the horror stories about what could go wrong during one's initiation with the prototype. He'd heard that, in the successful cases, time often seemed to stop.

Conscious that his men were still behind him and aware that anything he did right now could give him away, Deputy Director Von Kalt remained still.

He held the device tightly in his right hand, closed his eyes and concentrated. He focused his mind and waited.

He knew, if he were worthy, the device would initialize and display the op-sys title.

A moment later the word METACHRON filled his mind's eye.

That was enough. He smiled, pocketed the device and replaced his glove. Slowly, the city's life returned. Von Kalt heard the sounds of traffic and pedestrians all around them.

He checked Fox's pulse and pupils and calmly stood. "He's good to go. Get him out of here."

Von Kalt's men moved in and secured Dr. Fox. In minutes, they had him strapped to a gurney and loaded into the waiting transport.

The other unconscious patrons would wake feeling a bit nauseous and bloated, but otherwise the effects would wear off in an hour or so. In three hours, the compound would no longer even be detectable in their systems.

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## Chapter 14 – Serene Violence

The next day, when it was Ashley's turn to spar, there was already a buzz in the air. Her rebellious performance the day before was on everyone's mind. She couldn't be faulted for nonparticipation, but her style threatened to unbalance the ranking structure. In Ashley's desire not to break her own hands on someone else's face, she mastered lesson number two without even encountering lesson number one.

Ashley's match was called. They all stared, she was the alien; she wasn't playing by their rules. Ash had no intention of allowing anyone to break her nose, spit her lip, or blacken one of her eyes. And since there was no requirement to hit anyone else, she didn't feel she was doing anything wrong.

This time she was up against an obviously more experienced boy, Jason. He stretched, bounced and shadowboxed in his corner. For one so young, his musculature was already sharply defined. Ashley knew that if he hit her, he would make her bleed; he simply couldn't be allowed to hit her.

Sihing Cleary was refereeing the match, and when he blew the whistle, half the heads in the hall turned to watch. Jason unloaded his intricately prepared arsenal of combinations, jab, jab, hook, low kick, jab, high kick, hook, elbow, knee.

Ashley dodged the first few strikes and realized Jason was a robot. He was programmed into formulas of strikes and kicks. Her father would have called him an automaton. It was also how Becca danced, mechanically. Jason was more dangerous than Becca but just as predictable.

Ash stepped back far enough to exaggerate his flawed operation; he continued to chop and punch and kick at the empty air, two jabs, a hook, a roundhouse kick, a spinning kick and a front kick. Everyone could see how ridiculous it was, but he didn't stop. Ashley stood across the ring, waiting as he punched toward her.

Frustrated and embarrassed, Jason charged. Ash spun past him, seemingly through him. He couldn't touch her. When he moved, she moved first. She was a matador and his bull was getting tired. Ashley walked to the



edge of the circle and lowered her gloves.

Jason recognized the arrogant gesture for the taunt it was and growled behind his mouthpiece. He charged again, swinging wildly. Ashley danced along the edge of the circle and he kept coming, infuriated. She let him charge past her, out of bounds. Cleary blew the whistle and gestured for them to come back to the ring. Jason violently bounced with energy, stomping back to the center.

Ashley walked slowly, lazily, taking forever to get into position, infuriating Jason. As Cleary prepared to blow the whistle, Ashley raised her hand and stepped away from the center, turning her back to them. She adjusted her shirt, rolled her shoulders and stretched her neck.

The other matches had ended; the whole room was watching her. She took her time, not gloating or taunting; but making Jason furious just the same.

Ash gradually turned back to Cleary and Jason, who growled impatiently. Ash openly laughed at him. He cocked a fist to swing at her, but caught himself and waited for Cleary to blow the whistle.

Cleary was content to let Ashley dig her own grave and he waited for her to get settled. Finally Ash smiled and nodded.

Cleary turned to Jason, who nodded.

He blew the whistle and Jason leapt at Ashley, throwing his whole body into the air. There was nowhere for Ashley to go, it was too late; she was caught. She collapsed under her attacker's assault.

Jason, however, was not prepared to catch his prey so easily, and discovered himself falling with the girl under him. He wasn't going to hurt her as much as both of them and not deliberately or honorably, but stupidly.

Ashley held Jason's upper arms as her butt hit the mat. Her feet came up from nowhere, and she caught his weight at his midsection. Ash transferred Jason's momentum as softly as if he were a baby and tossed him across the room.

Ash watched him sail, ass over teakettle, through the hall. With his head down and his feet toward the ceiling, he flew through the air, as people slid out of his way. He overshot the mat and crashed in a tangled heap on the hard gymnasium floor.

Ashley got up before Jason even came to a complete stop. Relatively unhurt, he was instantly back on his feet and sprinting toward her. No whistle had blown to stop him, as Cleary, fascinated by the action, had failed to blow it.

Ash stepped forward as Jason reached her. She turned to the side and

pinned his foot to the mat, Jason whip-lashed into the ground. The impact was so crisp and sharp that the entire room was rendered silent in its wake.

Cleary blew the whistle. He gestured for Lopez and Shou to help and knelt beside Jason. Ashley stepped away from the action. The three instructors were all focused on the unconscious student. Ash drifted further away.

Cleary saw her walking off. He grasped Ash gently by the arm and led her back to the ring, gesturing for her to kneel, facing away from where he, Lopez and Shou continued to work on reviving the unconscious Jason.

It took almost twenty minutes for Jason to open his eyes, another ten to get him walking and talking again. Finally, Shou decided he was well enough to return to the ring, where the match was called in Ashley's favor.

Ashley's legs were sore and blood-deprived from kneeling. She thought it ironic, that both she and Jason limped from the hall, although separately. No one congratulated her. No one talked to her. Ashley told herself that it didn't matter. *What did she expect?*

Her distaste for violent culture, combined with her superior skills, had shown up instructors and students alike. Of course, they were quiet. It felt just as awkward for her.

\*\*\*

Dr. Fox woke to discover himself in an opaque plastic cell. They'd left him his clothes but had taken his shoes. Light filtered into the room from everywhere and nowhere. There was a small enclosure with a toilet and a sink. He was grateful that he hadn't been sent somewhere excessively primitive.

Fox checked his pockets; empty. The Metachron was gone. It was just as well. Fox realized it had influenced him. It was different from the Micronix, which he had created and programmed. Having survived the explosion at the Epsilon Facility, which took the lives of forty thousand criminals, it had a different vibe, to say the least.

Based on his own investigation, Fox suspected that it was, in fact, the facility itself. He theorized that the 'Metachron' had consumed every ounce of metallic alloy present and expelled 'waste' material in the explosion.

The Metachron was different. He was glad to be rid of it.

The room was cold and having nowhere special to sit, Fox settled on the floor, essentially the same place he'd awaken. He tucked his feet under his legs to try and minimize the cold. Discovering himself in a meditative posture, not particularly tired and with little else to do, he relaxed his mind and focused on his breath.

\*\*\*

Ash diligently avoided hurting anyone for the next few days, until Shou challenged her directly. She was taking it easy on her latest opponent. Obviously capable of finishing the match quickly, she deliberately refrained from striking the uncoordinated boy, Marcus.

"Why don't you hit him?" Shou asked between rounds.

"Why don't you hit him?" Ashley replied.

"He's half my size, he's no challenge for me," Shou answered.

Ashley glared at Shou and let her eyes say what her mouth did not. *"You're bigger than me and it wouldn't be fair for me to beat you up either."*

Shou returned her glare and saw the open challenge for what it was. He moved to the center of the ring and when the break was up, blew the whistle to restart the match.

Ashley moved so quickly, she caught both Marcus and Instructor Shou by surprise. She delivered her first punch, directly to the boy's solar plexus.

Marcus landed on his back and with a sudden, "whoosh."

The wind had been audibly knocked out from Marcus's lungs. He strenuously flexed his diaphragm, like tugging at the door of a recently closed refrigerator; he struggled to open his chest and breath again.

Marcus looked at everyone around him with a silent panic. He was drowning, grasping for air, flopping around as if he were a fish on dry land.

Shou limply blew his whistle. He helped the boy into a sitting position and softly tapped him on the back. Soon enough the panicking Marcus relaxed and was breathing on his own again.

Shou gestured for Ashley to step to the center, where he raised her hand, declaring her the winner by technical knock out.

"You're not a martial artist?" Shou asked.

"I'm a ballerina," Ashley answered.

\*\*\*

Fox sat in his plastic cell, meditating. He wondered about the physical necessity of the interface at all. His previous research showed that the terillium actually saturated the human body, as well as the airspace in a specific area and any metallic objects in its immediate environment.

He focused, but there was nothing. In a strange place, he needed the amplifier to make a connection. There was no way around that.

Stanwood spoke from the other side of the opaque door. "The

Attorney General still hasn't signed your arrest warrant, but he will, and when he does; it's not just you. We're closing down everything, all your projects, everything, unless you tell me what I want to know. You can stop all of this. Just say the word."

Fox opened his eyes. The opaque door was closed. "Stanwood. You coward, did you touch it yet?"

Stanwood didn't answer.

"You know you're probably the only one they left out. Everyone else knew. You do realize that, don't you? They've all been interfaced already, all your superiors. Miller, McCarthy, Croswell, even the old man himself. I know because I did it. I put it in his hand. They're all on the inside. You're the scapegoat. By coming after me, you're doing them a favor. They'd love to see us kill each other."

"Wake up, Fox, it's you in the cell. You're the loose cannon. But maybe you're right. Perhaps I'm overextended, but you're being naive if you think you're untouchable. From a mathematical perspective, this was inevitable. You have crossed too many lines."

"I'm just one person, Joe. You can kill me, but you can't control all of mankind. Maybe no one else will frighten you, the way I do, but you've never been of any interest to me. You can't stop evolution. I am insignificant. You are insignificant. You have no real power.

"Look at us," Fox continued. "Here I am helpless, locked in a cell, but you're so scared you can't even face me as a man. You need someone else's approval, someone else's permission to shoot me while I'm handcuffed. Tell me, who's the coward here?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Then open the door. If I'm not who you're afraid of, who is it?"

"I'm not stupid, Andrew. We're going to find the prototype, and when we do, we won't need to keep you on ice like this. It will all come out in the wash."

Fox burst into laughter. "You idiot, it was in my pocket! When your men arrested me, it was in my pocket. You're worried about evidence and procedure. There's not going to be any trial. I'm a national hero, you idiot. The cover up has already started, and you, my friend, are not invited to the after party."

"That's impossible."

"I think it's more likely your own men don't answer to you."

Fox laughed as Stanwood stomped from the cell door. He wondered who might have taken the Metachron. Most likely it was Stanwood's number

two, the man who had approached him, Von Kalt.

*How long would it take the Metachron's new disciple to seek him out? Would he even bother? He would go after Ashley; she has the Micronix now. It was starting. Fox could never have predicted the Metachron's appearance. This would unbalance everything. To think Astral, Ashley rather, to think she, a mere slip of a girl, could be ready for what Fox knew must be coming. He had miscalculated, terribly.*

\*\*\*

Ashley's next several matches also went the way of technical knock out. Scott and Jason still hadn't recovered from their injuries. Ashley had become something of a Mount Everest; she was the great challenge that summer. Boys traded and sold the chance to go up against her. Ashley, a waif of a girl, had become the Holy Grail of a preteen fight club.

The instructors agreed that the students were getting a powerful education in lesson number one, but they couldn't allow her to cripple the half the class, even if she did stay within regulations.

The recent classes had been a variety of submission moves, judo, krav maga and jiu jitsu. Ashley was fine with the practical instruction, but when it came to the daily matches, she didn't allow herself to be taken down.

Today it had been at the cost of one boy's nose. As he'd moved in for the takedown, Ashley had planted a foot in his face. It stopped him cold and, while technically legal, Shou gave her a disqualification for unnecessary force. It was her first loss.

Ashley didn't have to argue, the watching boys did that for her. Several of them challenged the call. Shou defended it, heavily stressing the unnecessary. Ashley simply knelt with her back to the mess, waiting for them to come to whatever conclusion they desired. She didn't care whether she won or lost. Their decisions about her were meaningless. She was practicing lesson number two. In fact, Ashley was pretty certain she had promoted it to number one.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 15 - Terminal Release

"I met with Senator Miller this afternoon," Stanwood told Fox, unseen, through the plastic door. "He certainly doesn't like you."

Fox sat in his cell, legs crossed, hands on his knees, eyes closed. He made no acknowledgement of Stanwood's presence.

"For what it's worth, I told him this is wrong. I believe we have no legal right to be holding you like this. It's not up to me, of course. As a suspected traitor, technically, we can hold you forever, but we'd need to strip you of your citizenship. They're trying to get the paperwork through justice. Believe me, once they do, this gate won't stay closed. Miller wants to use the same tech you developed for Black Willow. Can you believe it? I don't know if that's the textbook definition of irony, but it makes me smile."

Fox remained still.

"So, here's the deal. You have until the Attorney General signs whatever warrants he's going to sign. You have that long to save your family. He's going to sign the warrants and when he does, you and your family will be stripped of your citizenship rights.

"Miller already has a lien on your wife and children, claiming them as line items in previous budgets. He says he owns them, and the first thing he intends to do is cut them up, to see what you've got going on under the hood. I explained that if he did that, we wouldn't have any leverage on you. I got him to agree to just take one, preferably your wife, and to let us use the children to keep you talking. I figure, that way, everyone gets something. You have some measure of interest in cooperating and thereby get to ensure your children's safety."

Fox heard fear in Stanwood's voice.

"We all know you're wife was a traitor to the republic before you even met her."

"She is a patriot, as am I." Fox heard even a little fear in his own voice.

"We know he's going to sign them, the AG thinks you're dangerous enough that we don't have to wait for you to betray the country. After what

happened at Epsilon, it's in the nation's best interests to remove you from society.

"By the way, did you know they have a triggerman on your block? Apparently, they have a wet worker, dedicated to you, undercover for the almost seven years now, Mister Justin Case." Stanwood fell silent for a moment.

Fox remained motionless.

"That's what they've got lined up for your pretty wife and those two adorable children, unless you talk. Right now."

Stanwood waited.

"You have answers they want, and if you don't tell me, they're going after your family. Don't you even care?"

Fox didn't respond.

\*\*\*

After the excessive force charge, Ashley restrained herself a bit. She practiced what they taught her and engaged the boys on their level. She put forth a genuine effort to practice Mrs. Rabier's advice. She helped the boys learn more than they could have on their own.

It was Ashley's perspective on any given situation that set her apart. She seemed to view actual combat as a sort of minor annoyance. Facing timid or even aggressive opponents, Ashley treated both as individuals. She looked at the boys as if they were other kids, same as her friends back home.

The boys treated each other like wild animals. They stared each other in the chest and only looked their opponent in the face to taunt or insult each other. They lost focus by looking each other in the eye, usually failing in their attacks.

What set Ashley apart was more than physical coordination. Her movements were soft and clear, coordinated but not forceful. It was her calculating mental approach, it was the way she appraised her opponent and how she intuitively replied to their attack.

Ashley went out of her way to make eye contact. Once she did, and they continued to advance on her, she considered it an act of betrayal. The friend she'd spoken to in the glance, just moments before wouldn't attack her. Anyone who did was no longer a friend.

She always waited for the attack. She was the girl; she didn't have to attack. With her genetically enhanced speed and reaction times, the other students were no match for her. She could break any of them, anytime she wanted. It was the isolation, away from the sparring ring, that bothered her

most.

\*\*\*

Stanwood stood before the open door. Andrew had grown a bit of a beard. This particular morning he was seated against one of the back walls.

"It's been almost three weeks, do you realize that? I told you that when we opened this gate, it wouldn't be with good news. I was wrong. There's good news and bad news. The good news is you're free to go. The AG refused to sign the warrant on you. He says you're an exemplary citizen and that since this is the only case where you've strayed and without more evidence, he can't warrant stripping your citizenship."

Stanwood continued, "However, this is the bad news, in order to reaffirm your continued allegiance to the republic, and to prove your loyalty, he did sign everything else. Everything you owned, all your projects and patents, are now property of the federal government. Moreover, although you have been allowed to keep your citizenship, you have been reduced to first gate status. You will be required to give your two years of public service again, and this time, since you're broke, you'll actually have to do the work. How about that?"

Fox made no reply.

"I would recommend not interfering with the agents that have been sent to collect your wife and children. The chairman was insistent that they be included as part of the agreement, he pinpointed specific expenditures that clearly rendered them government property. We all objected to it, but in the end, we were overruled. There's a transport waiting for you topside. Take you wherever you want to go."

Fox rose and walked past Stanwood without acknowledging his existence.

"If you hurry, maybe you can beat them to Calistan Way," the Director said.

\*\*\*

### **Friday, July 26th, 2313**

After their three weeks at camp, Ashley and Geoff were packed up and herded to their transport, with all the other young attendees. The trip home took a little less than two hours, hardly enough time to acclimatize from their recent experiences. On the half-filled transport, with plenty of open space,



they sat together, acknowledging each other with nods and glances. Exhausted, they hardly spoke, but always staying close, within arms' reach of each other.

Once home and inside, Geoff dropped his bag near the front door. He went straight to the kitchen and raided the cabinets. Ash aimlessly drifted upstairs toward her room.

\*\*\*

Fox arrived home a little before three in the afternoon. Stanwood's men had been in place on the street for hours. They'd been ordered not to interrupt anyone coming or going from the structure. When the taxi arrived and docked on the rooftop access port, they observed, but didn't attempt to intercept Dr. Fox as he entered the house.

Fox went into his study and called up his open security applications. The home was secure. He went down to the basement living room and smiled to see Ash and Geoff stretched out on one of the couches, watching a vid stream.

"Dad!" Geoff jumped up.

Fox knelt and gestured for Geoffrey to whisper. "Quiet, Geoff. We only have a couple of minutes."

Ashley recognized her father's cautious manner and its implications at once. She sat up, hyper-alert.

"Ashley, do you still have that..." Fox held out his hand in a shape that suggested the narrow rectangular switchblade in Ashley's dresser.

Ash nodded.

"I want you to go get it," he said.

Ashley rose to go upstairs.

"Geoff, go on upstairs with your sister." Dr. Fox said.

"What's going on?" Ana asked, stepping out of the laundry room.

Fox threw his arms around his wife. "Stanwood had me arrested."

"Where have you been? Ross was here. He said you went off the grid. Are you okay?"

Fox whispered into her ear. "They're going to try and take us, but we're going to fool them. I love you."

"Are we decanting somewhere already?" She whispered back.

Fox only smiled.

"I love you too," Ana said, returning the smile. "I'm double checking the doors."

Fox followed his family as they headed upstairs.

Waiting in the hallway, Ash held the prototype in her hand. As her father approached she handed it to him.

Fox looked at it closely. He closed his eyes for a few moments and then returned it to her. "It's yours now, Ash. Take care of it. You won't lose it, let it help you."

Fox looked at his children, "Get your jackets, go on."

Geoff looked puzzled.

"Now," Dr. Fox insisted.

The children moved quickly to obey.

Moments later they returned.

Fox knelt in front of them. "Okay. This is it. The bad guys are coming, and they're the kind who shoot first and ask questions later. Do you hear what I'm telling you?" Fox's voice was warm and calm, utterly at odds with the words he was saying.

"We're smarter, so we're going to out-fox them, right?" he smiled.

The children were too scared to respond to the familiar family pun.

"I programmed the car to take off in a couple of minutes, but that's just to distract them. Yes, help is on the way, but it's going to take a little while. Right now, I want you to go sit on the stairs next to that window." Fox pointed to the landing of the back stairwell its the large window.

"In a few minutes, you're going to hear the upstairs hangar door open, and the car is going to take off. When that happens, I want you to go out that window, walk down the roof to that part where it's close to the ground and get into the forest."

"Why don't we go in the car, Dad?" Geoff asked.

"Because they're going to stop the car," Fox answered.

"Get in the forest and then what?" Ashley asked.

"Then you run, and you run."

"For how long?" Geoff asked.

"Never stop, you don't ever stop." Fox looked his son in the eyes.

"Geoff, listen to your sister. Stay with her, do what she tells you."

Fox turned to Ashley. "Ash, don't lose sight of him, even for a minute. Help is on the way. Remember that your mother and I love you very much. Smile, be polite, help others as much as you can and be careful. That's all there is. Now go get ready."

Geoffrey threw his arms around his father. Fox hugged his son back and pulled them both close.

"Where are we supposed to go?" Ashley asked.

"I want you to go west till you hit the ocean, then turn left and go

south, keep the water on your right hand side. You need to get to Mexico," He said.

"To Mexico?" Ashley asked.

"Yes. Go to Mexico. You will be safe there, safer than here. If Ross doesn't find you, the Christians are the safest people for you to be with."

"Dad?" Tears filled Ashley's eyes as she became aware that these were most likely their last words.

"Be good, trust your instincts and take care of your brother," Fox said.

Ashley hugged her father.

The hangar bay doors on the garage opened, and the family car lifted off.

Dr. Andrew Fox helped his children climb out the window and onto the low roof. He watched them as they ran to the edge, jumped down to the grass and slipped into the waiting forest.

\*\*\*

Dunkirk reached the Fox house nearly undetected. He suddenly rose from an overgrown section of the property, took a couple of steps toward the kitchen door, opened it and was inside. Only one of the observing agents saw him, but that was enough for the information to make it back to Stanwood.

After wiping his prints from it, Dunkirk set the keycard he used on a counter. It had been confiscated during Fox's arrest. The two hundred and twenty pounds of determined muscle that was Dunkirk peered into the nexus of the home. He saw no one.

Dunkirk withdrew to a corner of the kitchen and waited, listening. He watched the reflections in the windows and cabinets, waiting for what he knew must happen next. He relaxed his body and opened his mouth, allowing him to hear just a fraction better. He heard movement upstairs, small footsteps, hurrying. He heard sudden movement from downstairs, as well. In the reflections of a window, Dunkirk caught the image of Mrs. Fox moving toward him, heading for the kitchen.

\*\*\*

Fox was halfway down the stairs when Ana screamed from the kitchen. He cleared several steps at a time, reached the doorway and stopped.

A neighbor, Fox recognized him, Mr. Dunkirk; he stood, hiding behind Ana. She was in shock; she didn't seem to be breathing. Dunkirk had one hand behind Ana's back. In the other, he held a knife, the sleeve of his

sweatshirt pulled down and wrapped around the handle. Fox glanced at the carving block where the kitchen knives were stored. There were two empty slots.

Fox rushed toward them as Dunkirk jammed the second blade into Ana's body and then pulled them out, just as Fox reached her. Ana collapsed into her husband's arms, blood sprayed all over the floor. Dunkirk dropped the knives and exited through the kitchen door.

Fox held his wife as the color drained from her face. She couldn't speak, but Andrew held her close. He pulled her body toward the central cabinets of the kitchen. Fox dug out the first aid kit from its cabinet. He packed his wife's wounds with the blue-healing goo that he had created while still a boy and he prayed the damage wasn't too severe.

Fox could hear them arranging themselves outside his front door, getting ready to breach and clear. Andrew held his wife until they came into the house and pried her from his arms. The agents strapped her to a gurney and wheeled her out. Fox followed.

Several soldiers raised their weapons at Dr. Fox, but none fired.

Stanwood was standing at the end of the driveway.

As Fox approached, he spoke, "Joe, you have to help, Ana. Please..."

National Intelligence Director Joseph Stanwood raised his handgun into Fox's face and fired.

Assistant Deputy Director Wolfgang Von Kalt stood nearby. He watched his superior fire at Dr. Fox. He saw Fox fall to the ground. This was of no concern of his. The Micronix was not here. The original prototype was the only thing he was interested in.

The Metachron rested in his pocket, his hands folded behind his back. He didn't need to hold it anymore.

Von Kalt watched Fox die. He didn't move. No one did.

\*\*\*

Having escaped the house for a distant ridgeline, Ashley noted that the sound of the shot came some time later than the shot itself and the splash of blood.

Ashley didn't say anything to Geoff. Being older meant being taller, and in this case, that meant being able to see the man who shot her father. From where they were on the ridge, it was likely that Geoff didn't see it. She was frozen in place, staring at the scene below.

Her emotions threatened to overwhelm her. Her father had mentioned help. He'd said help would find them. She prayed it was soon.

Von Kalt suddenly turned and looked toward her. He spoke to his subordinates and pointed to Ash and Geoff, barking a command.

Ash turned and ran as fast as her feet would carry her, focused solely on putting one foot in front of the other, pulling Geoff along, deeper into the forest.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 16 – Run, Rabbits, Run

Doctor Fox tried to close his eyes and realized that would be impossible. He'd crossed over. His eyes were closed. It was the ambient light and the chemicals in the tank that caused the visual sensations. It had been awhile since he'd experienced the changeover.

After Stanwood shot him, Ross must have flipped the switch. Decanting would take four to six months. Fox never kept a warm clone on ice; it was too big a risk. Even though he had created the technology, it was owned by the government and restricted to the three am bodyguard program.

In a few moments, the drugs would kick in, and Fox would sleep until it was time. He savored these last few moments of consciousness as the chemicals worked their way into his mind. Focusing became difficult and then he slept.

\*\*\*

Ash and Geoff ran down the familiar paths at full speed. The forest was warm and inviting. They ran until she couldn't breathe anymore and Ashley released Geoff's hand. Ash was winded, but Geoff seemed relaxed. They walked quietly for a while, both reluctant to break the wordless spell of their natural temple.

Ash could tell the reality of their situation hadn't yet sunk in for Geoff. He walked beside her, calm and easy. There was no point in talking about it and upsetting him. Even though her stomach was doing somersaults and she was close to panicking; that was no reason to provoke the same response in Geoff.

In fact, Ash noticed his calm was influencing her, helping her to relax.

Feeling better, she glanced over to Geoff. "Want to keep going?"

Geoff nodded. They slowly resumed a mellow jog, evenly paced, their hands free.

"Where are we going?" Geoff asked.

"To the ocean," Ash answered.

"And then Mexico?" Geoff asked.

"Yeah, sure. Mexico," Ashley laughed.

"Otherwise they're going to catch us," Geoff said.

"They're not going to catch us," Ashley said.

"Probably they are," Geoff said.

"Okay. You're right, probably they are," Ashley answered.

"So then we won't know until it's too late," Geoff replied.

"Right, so let's go back to being calm."

"And Mexico?" Geoff asked. "What's wrong with Mexico?"

"Technically, we're still at war with Mexico," Ashley answered.

"No, we're not," Geoff said, parroting their father. "They were at war with us, and it's been over for seven years. Dad said."

Ashley shook her head. "War is war. Heading toward it sounds stupid to me."

"Dad says we'll be safe with them," Geoff argued.

"You don't believe that," Ashley answered. "And I don't speak Spanish."

"You can learn, it's easy," Geoff said, smiling.

Ashley froze, the color drained from her face. In the distance, she could hear the soldiers closing; heavy boots and the rattle of weapons, sounds alien to the forest.

"We have to run, now!" Ashley said. She clutched Geoffrey's hand and hauled him along. It was all he could do to stay upright, planting one foot after the other, catching himself as they fell down the canyon trail.

A half-dozen turns ahead they came around a sharp bend and found themselves face to face with Mr. Dunkirk. He was covered in blood.

They skidded to a halt, Ashley's right hand found the prototype in her back pocket, but she didn't pull it out. Geoff stood behind her, exactly where she'd have told him to be.

Mr. Dunkirk stood still, apparently as afraid of the children as they were of him. Then, just as suddenly, he snapped out of it and smiled. It was the grin of a lunatic.

Ashley grabbed Geoff's hand and they were gone, down a branching trail. They heard no sounds of pursuit, but the soldiers had to be getting closer.

Before they got much further, the brother and sister came upon Bobby Dunkirk. He was standing on the path with his hand in his pocket. Ash slowed to a walk, Geoff beside her.

Bobby looked stunned stupid, much as his father had.

Suddenly, Ashley knew. She knew what it was. She pulled out the rectangle. She watched Bobby's eyes fixate on the dark metal obscured by her thin fingers.

"Bobby, Bobby? Are you all right?" Ash whispered.

His eyes were glued to her fist. She put the prototype back in her pocket. Once it vanished, Bobby seemed to come to his senses. His gaze suddenly snapped up to her face, as if he hadn't recognized them until that moment.

Ash ignored the fact that they had just come upon Bobby's father, covered in blood, and treated him as she would any of the neighboring children, in an emergency situation.

"Bobby, There are soldiers coming. We have to run right now. You should come with us."

Ashley grabbed Bobby's free hand and moved down the trail. He didn't resist. Ash moved downhill as fast as she could pull Bobby and Geoff.

After a few minutes, Bobby began to struggle against her. "No. No, it's okay. They're not coming for me. He's going to get them."

"What?" Ashley slowed, but kept moving.

"We don't have to run. Once he gets them we can sit. I want to sit on the rock."

Ashley looked at Bobby as if he'd lost his mind, but she kept moving, slowing to a walk.

"He'll get them, watch." Bobby was getting loud, and pulling away from Ash.

Ashley was afraid the approaching killers would hear him, and stopped. She let go of his hand.

From the trails behind them, near where they'd run into Mr. Dunkirk, there came a heavy crash with a yelp. The cry was abruptly cut short. Then came the sounds of wild gunfire.

Ashley took both Geoff and Bobby's hands and ran for all she was worth. The cries and gunfire continued until they were extinguished, one at a time. With the forest quiet behind them, Bobby began to drag his feet.

Ashley had no choice but to stop and let him go.

"He stopped them." Bobby looked out into the forest.

Ashley wasn't sure Bobby was playing with a full deck, but then again, those soldiers should have caught them already. If someone did stop them, it made sense that it was Mr. Dunkirk. After all, he had been covered with blood.

Ashley knew her father's work could put the family in danger. Seven



years ago, during the Battle of San Diego, her Uncle Geoff had been killed. She knew her father had engineered a dangerous weapon that had won the war. She knew he was still heavily involved in military projects. It wasn't too shocking that soldiers had come for them. This very predicament had long been a Fox family 'worst case scenario'. What had now happened to the soldiers seemed even more menacing.

Bobby backed away from Ashley, slowly, as if she were dangerous to him. "Soldiers were chasing you. They want what you have. You have the power," he said.

"They want to take us," Ashley answered.

"They want your power, but he got them. He got them all. They don't have the power. Not like you do."

Bobby turned away from Ash and Geoff and began to walk back uphill. He paused to look back over his shoulder. "He got them. He got them all." Then he was gone, vanished into the trees.

\*\*\*

Stanwood forbade Von Kalt from going into the forest himself. Otherwise, he was sure he'd have caught Ashley and Geoff. He couldn't believe they had escaped. His men had been killed. Only their communicators had been found, even the bodies had not been recovered.

Stanwood had proposed that Dr. Fox had conspirators hidden in the forest. Von Kalt openly questioned why they would have taken the bodies. The only thing they could agree on was that the children certainly hadn't done it.

Now, standing in Ashley's bedroom, he felt it. Wolfgang Von Kalt knew the Micronix had been here, he could feel it in his bones. The Metachron would help him find it. It couldn't stay hidden forever.

\*\*\*

That night, far from their home turf, Ash and Geoff found a playground near one of the parking areas. They smoothed out the sand under a large four-sided play-set and curled up against the chill mountain air.

"What do you think happened to Mom and Dad?" Geoff asked.

"I don't know," Ashley answered. "We'll find out in the morning."

Ashley stared hard at the tree line. Soon, it was warm and cozy under the jungle gym, she was tired and sleepy, but she watched the woods for well over an hour before her eyelids fell shut.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 17 - Blue Goo

**Saturday, July 27th, 2313**

The next morning brother and sister woke early. They crawled out from under the jungle gym, stretched and wiped the dew from their clothes. Ashley looked at her brother and thought he looked as if he'd just spent the night under the slide. She realized she must look the same and took a deep breath.

"Can we go home now?" Geoff asked.

Ashley stared at the tree line for a long time, debating whether they should head home or out to forage in the city. She pointed to the nearby park bathroom, "I gotta go."

"Me too," Geoff agreed.

A few minutes later, standing in the early morning sunlight, face and hands washed, Ash felt better than she thought possible, for having spent the night beneath a slide.

"We can't go home yet, Geoff," Ashley said. "We need to find out what happened first. We need a library. There's got to be something in the news."

Ashley thought Geoff seemed to be handling everything rather well. "You okay?"

Geoff looked over and nodded. "I miss Mom and Dad. I want to go home."

Ashley smiled but said nothing. She held his hand as they made their way down the canyon to find a public library.

Finding a local library branch wasn't at all difficult. Shortly after opening, Ash and Geoff settled into a wired carol where they quietly scanned the latest news reports. There was nothing about her father being shot or their home being raided. The most recent stories involving their father were about the Epsilon explosion out in the desert. He was mentioned in a piece about Pierce's suicide, but nothing recent, nothing from yesterday.

Twenty minutes later, Ash had some idea of what her father's latest projects had been. Anything compelling she read aloud for Geoff. She was amazed that he hadn't complained about being hungry, tired or bored.

Ash had assigned him the task of lookout, and he dutifully nudged her whenever someone wandered too close. They remained largely undisturbed, free to peruse the public terminal to their heart's content.

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### **August 29th 2278 - 35 years ago**

The first day of eighth grade, and half the class stood huddled around Wendell Meyer, seated on an industrial table in the science laboratory. His pants were pushed up to his thigh, his ruined knee exposed for all. Wendell helped himself to a handful of the blue goo from the ten-gallon tub next to his leg. He gingerly applied it to the mangled joint. Near the beginning of the previous school year, almost a year to the day, he'd been trapped in the pool's hydraulic cover; the mechanical joint had mutilated his knee.

Wendell had spent the bulk of the school year in bed, taking all his classes in virtual. He'd had four surgeries and the knee, had been pinned together for six months. The pins had just come out last week. The doctors had talked extensively about replacing the joint all together, but Wendell's mother had objected.

Wendell Meyer and Andrew Fox had been close friends since first grade. After the accident, Andrew dedicated all his spare time, and a significant amount of his family fortune, in creating and developing the goo.

"It itches," Wendell said, as his skin greedily devoured the blue-tinted mixture. "Ouch!"

The knee swelled under the blue coating. "ARGHHHH!" Wendell cried. He lay back on the table, face knotted into a scream he didn't dare utter at full volume, for fear of bringing a teacher.

The boys watched as the knee physically repaired itself. A thick sweat popped out on Wendell's face. The joint began to make strange cracking and rending sounds. Wendell gulped air in tortured gasps.

A few seconds later the knee began to shrink, the blue tint staining the skin and bubbling from his pores. Within two minutes, Wendell's knee was back to its natural size, albeit a bit skinnier than the other, coated in a thick blue wrapping. The goo had become a kind of splint, a rubber bandage, holding the bones, tendons and ligaments in place.

Wendell swung his leg. "It works." He gestured for Jim Crowell to pass over his crutches. Jim reached out and picked them up but didn't hand them over.

"Fine." Wendell smiled and hopped down from the table. He stood on his own two feet for the first time since the accident. Smiling, he lifted and flexed the previously shattered knee. He walked a few steps, staring at the blue wrapped knee, and suddenly burst running from the room, screaming wildly.

Jim carried the crutches to the corner of the room and leaned them up against the wall.

"Who else wants to try?" Andrew asked.

At first the kids were skeptical.

Andrew opened a drawer full of dissection tools. "Step right up," he said and removed a tray of scalpels from the drawer.

"It can heal anything?" Stephen asked.

"It's healed everything I've tried so far," Andrew answered.

"Ha! What have you tried?" Joe Stanwood asked.

Andrew smiled. He held up his left hand and rolled up the sleeve of his school button-down. His arm was covered with the telltale blue rubber bandages.

Most of the kids looked nervous, staying well away from the surgical blades.

"I'll go first then," Andrew said, reaching out for a knife. He brought it down across the back of his left arm, opening a long gash between his wrist and elbow, spilling blood onto the counter top.

Andrew clenched his teeth and patiently applied a smooth coating of the blue goo. He held out his arm for the others to watch. Almost as if it were reversing the damage done by the blade, the goo sealed the gash. As it worked itself out of the cut, it formed a new blue coating and a few seconds later, Andrew's arm was good as new.

Wendell returned to the lab at full speed, catching himself in the doorframe. "Thanks, Andrew! You're the best! They said I was never gonna walk again!" Wendell ran off again at full speed, his footsteps and jubilant cries trailing down the hallway.

Andrew smiled, thrilled with Wendell's recovery.

"How's it work," Crowell asked.

"Supercharged poly-synthetic nano-stemcells. Once exposed to living tissue, it works backwards to regenerate any damaged or missing cells. Seems to work pretty good, so far," Andrew said.

Andrew Fox and Jim Croswell had been friends since early childhood. Their fathers often worked together on various government projects; Andrew and Jimmy saw each other a lot growing up. They had always been great friends.

Both Croswell and Fox were considered top among their peers, and neither of them took any crap from Stanwood, who bullied everyone else. Croswell was far more athletic than Fox, so the mantle of leadership naturally fell to him.

"What else did you try?" Stanwood asked, nodding to Fox's arm.

Joe Stanwood, in his own weird way, had never particularly fit in with anyone. Most of the boys were scared shitless of him. Only Andy and Jim seemed able to tolerate him. It seemed to the other kids that perhaps Fox and Croswell were entirely unaware of how spectacularly creepy Joe actually was. It was in his mannerisms, the slow way he talked and used his hands. He was, in a word, malevolent.

Andrew removed his shirt. His body was covered with blue rubber strips and sections. There was almost no open skin for more than a few inches.

"Holy shit," Croswell said.

"I feel one hundred percent fine. It activates the RNA to work overtime, fixing whatever's out of whack."

Stanwood looked into Andrew's eyes, taunting him. "You don't seem fine."

Andrew began to unbuckle his pants, but several objections and declarations of trust stopped him.

"And it gets absorbed through the skin like that?" Stanwood asked.

"You saw it."

"So, is it better for cuts or broken fingers?" Stanwood inquired.

"I think, either or," Andrew replied.

"Could it grow back a whole arm, or a leg?" Joe asked.

"I don't know, but I bet it can reattach them."

"No way," Stanwood answered. "Brain injuries? How do you get it in there?"

"Shit, maybe it can fix you, Joe," Croswell said.

Several of the other kids laughed.

"Fox is gonna be a millionaire. I bet it'll fix anything," Stephen volunteered.

"It fixed Wendell's leg." Tom Becket said. "He's happy as shit."

Andrew realized he didn't have to answer Stanwood's objections. The other boys were making his arguments for him. They had witnessed the power

of the goo.

Joe Stanwood raised his hands, smiling.

The guys grew quiet.

"Can you re-attach someone's head?" Stanwood asked.

"I don't know, but I'd love to try." Fox answered.

The boys heard the challenge and responded with an "Oooo."

"Don't cut anyone's head off, seriously," Stanwood replied.

"I think maybe you could re-grow a finger or something, but it would be really expensive," Andrew said. "It might take more than I've got here."

"How much did this cost to make all this?" Croswell asked.

"Close to seventeen million," Andrew said in a low voice.

"Holy shit!" Becket said. "What?"

"I said close to," Andrew countered. "I think you get Holy Shit at twenty."

"How close?" Joe asked.

"If you figure in all the test batches, a little over, maybe."

"But current medical science can already reattach limbs for a lot less," Stanwood pointed out. "And we have lots of ways to accelerate the healing process, so this is really kind of redundant. It's too expensive for the common people. All you did was waste a bunch of money."

An hour later, after more than seventy healed scrapes, cuts, abrasions, lacerations, fractures, burns and contusions, they had exhausted their creativity and courage. They had reached a place where the pain endured outweighed the novelty of having the tissue magically repaired.

Andrew took notes while the boys played. He took a sample of blood from each volunteer, usually from whatever instrument of violence used to create the tissue damage, never allowing any implement to be used twice. He bagged the tools of destruction and logged each into his notebook; along with the damage done and how long it took the goo to fully repair the wound.

With one boy, Jesse Parker, total repair took an agonizing forty seven seconds, but Jesse's wound had been rather severe. They had attacked his leg with an electric hedge clipper. Then they applied the goo and immediately stopped the femoral artery from dumping Jesse's entire blood supply on the laboratory floor. The boys had laughed and joked as they replaced chunks of meat into his thigh. In less than a minute, Jesse's leg was good as new, minus the damage to his school pants.

Croswell had wanted to see how hard the other boys could punch him. He asked each of them to give it all they had. He dared them to out do each

other in a single strike. After taking a haymaker from everyone in the room, Tom got creative and broke a glass beaker over Jim's head; his face looked like hamburger. The boys stuck a straw in Jim's his mouth and coated his entire face in goo. Andrew estimated it cost almost a hundred thousand dollars to wrap Jim's face, but they had plenty left.

Bored, they began to discuss grievous, possibly mortal wounds. Andrew tried to dissuade them.

Someone threatened suicide, challenging him to save them before they actually died.

Andrew countered with a smile that he'd never liked so-and-so and that he wouldn't help that individual anyhow. Several boys laughed, but no one did anything excessively stupid.

Andrew decided it was time to lock the goo up.

Croswell peeled the rubber from his eyes. "I want to try something bigger."

"Something bigger like what?" Andrew asked.

"I want you to cut my arm off," Jim said.

"You're fucking crazy," Stanwood said.

"No I'm not," he replied to Joe.

Croswell looked over to Andrew. "I want you to cut my arm off."

"Stay here." Andrew left the room. Half a dozen boys trailed after him.

Croswell, Stanwood and several others remained behind.

"Seriously Joe, you should try it, it really works." Croswell said.

"Fuck that," Stanwood said. "You don't know what the side effects are. Maybe someday you wake up and who knows. This shit might kill you a month from now."

"Yeah, well, Fox will die first."

Andrew walked to the locked glass trophy case, in the grand entrance hall of the academy. He picked up a nearby chair and used it to knock the glass out. The surrounding boys watched as he reached into the case and removed the long samurai sword, the katana, from the daisho: a set of two swords.

The set had been awarded to the Rivendell Kendo Team from the Yagyū Sword School of Japan. Andrew's great grandfather had competed in the tournament that had claimed the glorious victory. Now, the young man had pilfered his ancestor's trophy case for an afternoon of raucous and juvenile amusement.



Andrew argued the points and counterpoints in his mind. What he was doing was contributing immensely to science. He needed volunteers and to get them, he needed an extraordinary claim, an outrageous claim, a bit of theatre. He had broken the glass in a calculated gesture. He needed to put an end to the experiment while they still had a ton of goo. He needed to get caught; so the discovery could be exposed immediately, with a great number of credible witnesses.

On the way back to the lab, the boys joked about what they could do with such magical power. Several confirmed beatings they intended to dole out and then simply supply the recipient with a bit of blue goo to heal them right up. The lists of rivals were long, and the actions to be taken against them were intricate, cunning and cruel.

Once Andrew and the others returned with the sword, the boys who'd waited behind fell silent. Andrew Fox looked Jim Croswell in the eyes. He held the sword up, prepared to take it out of the sheath.

Jim stepped close to the tub and held his left arm out over it.

Andrew stepped back, and the other boys cleared back a few steps; room enough for him to draw and swing the sword.

Andrew gestured to Stephen and Jesse, standing opposite Croswell. "Grab his arm," Fox said.

The boys looked from Andrew to James, who nodded. They reached out to his hand.

"When I hit it, you have to take it right down into the goo. Then right back up to his arm," Andrew instructed.

"Goo? We should call it glue," Stephen said.

"Shouldn't we put some on his arm too?" Jesse asked.

"Yeah. Becket," Andrew pointed, "stand here, next to the tub. When I slash through the arm, Stephen and Jesse are going to be holding it. Wait for the sword to pass through, and then put your hands in the tub. As they bring the forearm to the tub, I want you to take a hand full of goo up to Jimmy's stump. Got it?"

Several kids laughed, but Tom nodded.

Andrew drew the sword from its sheath.

"I wonder if he'll scream," someone in the back said.

Andrew looked James in the eye and without waiting for a count of three or a ready, set, go, Fox slashed through Croswell's bicep and humerus. The sword severed the boy's arm with little more resistance than if it were slicing through smoke. Andrew held the sword low and still after the cut.

James didn't scream. He didn't gasp. He didn't make a sound.

Tom reached into the tub.

Stephen and Jesse brought Jim's forearm and elbow down into the tub, smoothly passing Tom, on his way up to Jim's open arm. As Tom applied the goo, an excited pulse of blood sprayed into the room.

Jes and Stephen dunked the detached stump and reattached it to Jimmy's remaining upper arm. The room was quiet except for the sound of blue and red drops hitting the floor.

The goo caused the skin to swell and knit together where it had separated. Blood and blue syrup bubbled from the bicep. As the excess ran off, the remainder of the goo grew darker, harder, rubbery and thick.

James smiled. He took a deep breath and wiggled the fingers of his left hand. Jesse and Stephen felt the arm come alive under their grasp. It grabbed and shook them. It had taken less than thirty seconds.

Croswell pulled the limb away and flexed it. Excess goo and plasma burst from the seam, the scar, where the limb had been severed. James punched his palm then turned and slammed his hand through a wood paneled cabinet, laughing.

Withdrawing the fist, James saw he'd damaged it anew. He laughed as he lathered the splintered fingers with, "Dr. Fox's Super-Blue Healing Goo."

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Ashley read about how her father's first invention, the blue goo - now mass-produced for less than seventeen cents a liter, had revolutionized medicine.

During that first week of eighth grade, all the boys involved in the incident with the goo found them-selves assembled in a large conference room, seated with their parents and their parent's lawyers.

Professor Cotton recited his discovery of the scene in the laboratory. The adults got the whole story, from Andrew's inspiration by Wendell's accident, to Jim's courageous determination in the name of scientific progress.

The patent filed in Andrew's name resulted in a massive windfall. In the final settlement, all the kids who'd participated in the blue goo experiment received a king's ransom. Joe Stanwood, who hadn't participated, got nothing.

Ashley didn't realize that Stanwood, the man who had just killed her father, had known him all his life. She had no idea of their history. She couldn't know that Stanwood had bumped Wendell, knocking him into the pool to begin with, and that her father had always suspected him of it.

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## **Chapter 18 - The Cyber-Tanks**

Ashley continued reading, diving into her Father's publicly reported past. Andrew had shot to the top ranks of several fields literally overnight. Neither did he seem to have much trouble staying there.

Ash read the controversy about the war tanks. She'd been alive when that happened and remembered the time, even though she'd only been four. That was when Uncle Geoffrey had been killed.

Ash tried to piece together the news reports she was reading now, with snippets of conversation she'd overheard back then. Names came back to her. She remembered that the people who'd taken over the project had gone crazy, not following the proper procedures. She remembered the controversy, the possibility her father could have been imprisoned. He wasn't, but it had been a tense time.

The war was over, and everyone agreed that he was responsible for that. He hadn't been arrested, but the inevitability of betrayal at the highest levels hung over him like a black cloud. Losing his brother had changed Ashley's father in a profound way.

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### **December 31st, 2304 – Nine years earlier**

Another night on the office couch. It was just after six when Fox awoke. Being the dead of winter and the last day of the year, the sun still had not yet lit the horizon. Fox had a couple of hours before the Generals arrived. Fox knew the project waiting outside his office, the ten thousand cyber-tanks, would win the war.

It was footsteps that had awakened him; someone was coming. Dr. Fox sat up in the darkness and rubbed his face. Visitors' plural, there were at least two of them. Fox switched on the light.

Only a moment later the knock at the door still disturbed him. "Yes,

come in."

Chief Operator Chris Matthews and Special Agent Tasha Vangen entered.

The Doctor smiled. "So, this is it. The big day."

Matthews nodded, "We're all ready, Sir."

Third Gate Citizen; Chris Matthews was one of those gung-ho patriots that rarely looked before he leaped. Fox didn't trust him to think for himself, but if you gave him an order, he'd die before giving up. You couldn't have everything in a project manager, and Matthews was better than most. He was honest and loyal, and those qualities were valuable beyond measure.

"We've got thirty-six units spooled up and another twenty-four taking on fluids and ammunition," Matthews reported.

Special Agent Vangen looked troubled. Tasha was special for several reasons, the least of which being her status as an international dignitary on loan from Sweden. By default, the clear-headed young woman often found herself the elected spokesperson to go up against the by-the-book and party-line Matthews. She was the most socially well-adjusted scientist Dr. Fox had met in years; she was sharp as a neutron laser, cool under pressure, and a pleasure to work with.

Being from such a socially progressive country, Dr. Fox suspected it was the tradition of community that allowed the young researcher to share her discoveries and triumphs with the team. Most of the other members, Citizens of the Republic, were bred to be fiercely competitive.

Tasha was also dating his Andrew's younger brother, Geoffrey. They were secretly engaged. Fox presumed they were waiting for the project to be officially over before they said anything.

From the look on Tasha's face, it was clear something had gone horribly wrong. Fox knew, at this late stage of the game, that's just the way it went sometimes.

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Major General Cruthers and his staff had arrived at the nearby observation station a day earlier. Ten miles north of the border, they reviewed intelligence data, watching in fast forward as the enemy steadily flooded into Tijuana over the past month.

Over two million strong, the Christian Socialists intended to take San Diego with the force of sheer numbers alone. The tension in the room was palpable. The intelligence officers were panicked, but not about the enemies' numbers. They couldn't identify any weapons. The enemy had arrived empty

handed.

The socialists always marched with artillery. There was no other way they could cross the border en-mass without some method of detonating the mines. The presence of cannon had always been the justification for the republic's overwhelming response.

It would be difficult for the talking heads in Washington to explain the dropping of bulk munitions on a group of civilians. The officers continued to scramble, but all they could find were light arms: handguns and rifles. The People's Army of Christ the Redeemer hadn't brought a single cannon. Usually they had an overwhelming amount of artillery, but today, they had none.

Cold California sunlight hit the few remaining sandstone and glass structures. Ground-bound buildings and houses that could not be moved reflected a dull, empty sky. Until as little as a month ago, the sky was filled with hovering structures, but now San Diego stood empty, evacuated.

Only freeway cables remained, hanging flat and lifeless. All the hover-tech high-rises had flown away, north to Angel City, or northeast to Palm Springs and Phoenix. Washington did not want the relocations to become permanent, even if the destruction of the ground based structures in San Diego proved unavoidable. The concept of surrendering San Diego was totally unacceptable. The Republic would rather see the remainder of the city razed than to let it fall into enemy hands.

Despite the fact that the enemy was armed with little more than light-arms and ethanol driven vehicles, once the Christians marched in, the consensus in Washington would be to dump bulk munitions, destroying the South American People's Army of Christ the Redeemer, as well as the cities of San Diego and Tijuana.

General Cruthers advocated dropping the big one and being done with it. His superiors strongly disagreed, arguing that the radioactive fall-out would endanger the entire coastline. General Cruthers didn't care much for California, but his superiors ruled that a three-day carpet-bombing campaign was preferable to a nuclear event on national soil.

The General had been hearing good things about the cyber-tank project, and he was excited about its delivery in just a few hours. Today was New Years Eve, and if the intelligence estimates were correct, the Socialist People's Army would be massing at the border by sunset; crosses, guns and flags held high, prayers on their lips.

It was always the same; the faithful came and died by the thousands,

and San Diego would succumb to its bloody fate as so many smaller cities already had. The socialists would not retreat, and another rotting cavity would be created on the Republic's southern border. The General longed to be able to stop them without destroying a hundred stories of steel and glass. He held no concern for human life. In fact, San Diego was already lost.

No one had stayed. No one was going back anytime soon. The only thing left was to punish the enemy for their forward momentum. That was enough for him. That was all he needed to feel victorious. The cyber-tanks were his best hope for that victory.

Two hundred miles north and seventy miles west of the coast, a twelve layer military testing facility hovered above the ocean. The unit's anti-gravity drives maintained a comfortable ten thousand feet above the water, nothing but ocean and sky in every direction, as far as the eye could see.

Three heavily armed patrol craft endlessly circled the facility at a ten-mile radius. Their weapons systems were always hot, per security protocol, ready to fire on any errant vehicles that might foolishly enter their perimeter.

Each layer of the facility was composed of several floors, with an array of hover-disks, working in unison to maintain equilibrium. The twelve floors were arranged in a stacked formation, several miles square and relatively flat. Each deck featured a unique environment, desert, forest or swampland. The levels grew in square footage as one went upward.

The top level stretched ten miles square and featured a rich urban environment, several blocks of seven to ten story buildings. The tests at this facility employed live ammunition and many areas had been reduced to heaps of rubble and twisted steel. While others were clearly in a state of construction, being rebuilt for the umpteenth time.

In the east, the sun touched the distant horizon. The early desert air felt clean and crisp against the Doctor's face. For the past week, he'd been in a state of panic. Finally, all the last minute details were complete and the project was ready for delivery.

The transport landed on the upper receiving dock, and the personnel disembarked. Major General Cruthers, followed by his colleagues, was fairly glowing with excitement. After brief introductions, Dr. Fox led the gentlemen to the storage hangar.

The cyber-tanks sat connected to various cables, power and fluids snaking along the floor to ports and pumps. The hangar smelled of industrial chemicals, gun oil and fuel. The tanks themselves were dark masses of armor plate with wicked looking tracks and munitions delivery systems protruding

from several angles. Extra ammo drums were mounted on the rear fenders. Belt-fed twelve-barrel machine guns were mounted to the front. Running perfectly, they glided over rough and rocky ground smoother than ice on glass; four diesel engines powered the heavy-duty treads; top speed - two hundred kilometers an hour.

Dr. Fox led the inspection team up to one of the forward units. He pointed out the shielded sensor array, the triple redundant communications drives, overlapping armor plates and other external features before touching on the internal functions of the unit.

Colonel Thompson, standing next to General Cruthers, raised his hand. "Are these units autonomous or do they require rear-echelon support?"

"Both and neither, actually. They house organic operators, wired directly to the control systems and they also maintain constant communication with command and control agents; here at the facility."

"You're saying there are people in there? A soldier, an operator?"

"An experienced soldier, battle tested veterans. They have some of the best reaction times we've ever seen..."

"But isn't that illegal?" the colonel interrupted.

General Cruthers rolled his eyes. "Thompson, do you want to be part of this unit or can I just transfer your ass back to Washington?"

"Sir, it's just..."

"We're trying to win a war here, Colonel."

"Sir, direct weapon-to-brain wiring systems have been illegal for over seventy years. The political ramifications could be..."

"It's illegal for citizens, Thompson. We can't be expected to fight a war with fucko's back in Washington making all the rules."

Cruthers turned back to Dr. Fox. "Please continue, Doctor."

Later that afternoon, as he was escorted from the facility, Dr. Fox had an awful feeling about the impending skirmish. He had tried to impress upon the General and his staff that the bio-tanks should never be taken above level six when facing civilians. The higher levels were reserved for more advanced enemies. The Christian socialists could hardly be called an organized enemy. Their defense and offense were one and the same, a human wave of men, women, and children: healthy and young, old and sick. Their attack came in the form of a protest march. They all came.

Fox felt sick to his stomach knowing that Cruthers and staff would be commanding the base-side operators. Fox knew that Matthews and his team weren't likely to play along. Unfortunately, they were no longer under his

jurisdiction. The operators were contracted as part of the project deliverables and now accountable to the military authorities responsible for the project.

Dr. Fox suspected Cruthers intended to take the mechanized war machines to their highest level, ten, reserved for training only; one mech against another. At that level, the machines would drive over infants, relishing in the squishy sounds from beneath their treads.

Fox was suddenly awash in fear, regret, and shame. He contemplated demanding the pilot turn the vehicle around but didn't. He knew the captain would not change the flight path. If he went back and opposed Cruthers now, it would be career suicide. They would call it treason. Now there was little Fox could do besides get himself shot.

Late in the afternoon, a ripple went through the crowd; it was time. The barbecues were hastily put out and the caravan prepared to press north. Small arms were given a quick field cleaning and oiled. Ammunition was passed around and loaded into clips. Children and old folks packed into cars, alongside sand bags and ammunition crates.

The faithful fell silent for a final blessing. They crossed themselves, kissed their rosaries and plastic glow-in-the-dark statues of Jesus, (which were passed around and dutifully placed on the dashboards of the cars). They waited while the audio up front was sorted out, excusing the whispered joke or interruption to pass the tequila bottle.

Finally, Father Ricardo raised the microphone. "En el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espiritu Santo." He made the sign of the cross over the crowd, holding a crucifix in his hand, which he kissed, the mic held low, in his left.

The people made the sign of the cross, each in their own way, in their own time.

"Brothers and sisters, we are gathered here this evening to celebrate freedom and community in the Lord. This is the birth of a new age. Tomorrow the sun will rise on another city, freed from greed and tyranny. Once these were our lands, but for 500 years, the liars and hypocrites from across the sea have stolen our birthrights.

"Yes, I say hypocrites, though many profess to be members of the faith. They were once People of the Lord, but they have fallen. For the Lord says that one cannot serve two masters and they are the servants of gold.

"They erect borders and issue citizenship cards of different status. That is not truth. For are we not all children of the one true God? What is a citizen? It's just a word, an idea. It's an idea that is used to separate the



children of God. Used to put one person's worth above another's. We are not different, American or Mexican, European or Asian, African, Columbian or Canadian; we are all children of the Lord. So we must be - brothers and sisters.

"Show me a border in the earth. It does not exist. The Lord did not create borders. He created mountains, rivers and oceans; which some men miscall borders, but they are only mountains, rivers and oceans.

"We serve truth. For only the truth can set you free. I am the way, the truth, and the life. Serve the poorest among you, so that he may know the Lord's tender loving care.

"When We, The People Of The Word, arrived here in this place, our Lord struck the enemy with fear and made him take flight. He does not stand and face us. He does not want to hear the Word of God. He knows we come in the name of Justice, Liberty, and Equality.

"There is not made, the missile that can kill an ideal. Our enemy once worshipped these same ideals and they know how powerful they are, but they have grown corrupt and criminal in their twilight years. The Lord has raised us up and put us in this place that we might spread his word among them.

"Our Heavenly Father has done his part. He has shown us the road we must travel. It is up to us to follow it. Let's bring the light to those who are lost, trapped in darkness. Lord, though the way before us may be full of peril, give us courage to press forward and return to these, our ancestral lands. I bless you in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. En el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espiritu Santo. Amen,"

The blessing over, celebratory beers were cracked and the People's Army fired up competing mariachi music from rival sound systems.

In the failing light, torches, flashlights, and vehicle-mounted flood lights burst to life. The engines of the faithful were put in low gear and the army surged forward, crossing the imaginary border from Mexico into the United States, with high-pitched screams, and bursts of automatic gunfire punctuating the auspicious nature of the event.

Shaped like an elbow, the coastline of San Diego is dotted with hills, climbing from and returning to the Pacific Ocean. The People's Army had a twelve-mile march to the center of the downtown area. The first few miles were littered with mines: a cratered, barren stretch of barbed wire, collapsed trenches and half buried corpses. The Immigration Customs Enforcement Agency had declared the land a free-fire zone decades ago. Both sides fired mortars into it anytime someone tried to cross.

The Christian Communist Army made ponderously slow progress, as everything in their path was consumed. Stretches of barbed wire were rolled up and secured to vehicles. Metal barricades were cut with high-powered torches and used like railroad ties to repair the path ahead. From the sand bagged backs of rolling pickup trucks, the People's Army fired homemade mortars across the no-mans land, detonating the waiting mines and blowing holes in the longer stretches of barbed wire.

The battle had just begun, but already the city had been given up for dead. Only the inevitable desiccation of the metropolitan corpse remained, the smashing of street-level windows and burning of storefronts. San Diego had no power or water flowing through her veins; no foodstuffs were delivered to her markets. Not one floating residence or business structure adorned her skyline. Anything that could be carried out during the evacuations had been taken long ago. Only evidence of mercenaries and marines littered the streets now.

The marines had built their barricades on the southern wall of the city. Teams of sharp shooters occupied every room with a view and platoons held strategic locations along every major route. But all combined, they numbered under twenty thousand. The People's Army had swollen to several million strong.

The marines were required to stop the enemy at all costs, but against millions, they knew they could hardly even slow them down. Before long, the remaining soldiers heard the first of the proximity mines go off.

The Christians ran vehicles into the minefields at high speed. The mines were set to be triggered by foot traffic, so a single vehicle could take out several, providing it didn't crash into a collapsed tunnel, crater, or any of the dozens of other likewise destroyed remains of its ancestors.

The marines heard the mines begin, and the call went out over the radio for all soldiers to retreat to bravo positions as air strikes were expected to begin any minute. The young soldiers retreated and waited, but the air strikes never came.

At the Centaur Facility General Cruthers argued with the high command about the launch orders. He wanted to activate half the arsenal, but couldn't get Washington to commit that level of support. Besides, there were only a dozen control stations and only a dozen operators; restricting the initial run to a dozen units, launched one at a time. The General's demand to allow the tanks run unsupervised had ended the debate. Cruthers roundly cursed Washington as a bunch of rear echelon cowards and he only managed to get

seven tanks off the ground.

The first cyber-tank unit crashed into the no man's land directly opposite the Soldiers of Christ. The People stopped in their advance and solemnly regarded the impact site. They had watched it come whistling in and expected a massive explosion. The impact was immense, huge clouds of dirt and debris billowed upward.

Several shots were fired at the vehicle, the bullets screaming away as they bounced and tumbled from the armored surface. The unit offered no response.

Despite their fear of the blackish metallic vehicle, the men crept forward. It took several minutes for the rag tag band of resistance fighters to surround the vehicle, but eventually, they did.

They inspected its government-assigned markings, meaningless combinations of letters and numbers. One drunken soldier leaned up close against a tinted window. " Oye, hay un tipo aqui." <Hey, there's a guy in here>. He looked over his shoulder to his comrades. "Y sus ojos son de oro." <And his eyes are golden>.

The crowd jumped back as the engines inside the tank ignited. Before they could move away, barrels rose from the machine's hide, and it lurched forward. The courageous men closest to it were immediately crushed under the sharp treads. Hundreds were mowed down by the fire-belching machine guns, blasting hot shrapnel into the Soldiers of Christ.

The next two units landed closer to the northern side of the border, and had to drive forward to meet the enemy. The following four came to earth behind the southern border, chewing up God's People from behind. There was no escape. There was no mercy, and by dawn, there was no more conflict in San Diego.

A shootout in the operations lab had prevented more than seven launches. When ordered to set the tanks to level ten, the lead operator, Matthews, objected and quickly found himself in a heated argument with the soldiers. One of them accused him of being a traitor and physically struck him. Matthews drew his weapon and two nearby soldiers shot him over a dozen times.

Matthew's comrades, including Geoffrey Fox, drew their weapons and had themselves a wild-west shootout with the soldiers, right there in the control room. Wielding small arms, the operators shot at the soldiers who, sporting assault rifles, opened fire on everything, killing the operators, each

other, and utterly destroying the machinery.

The Generals, watching the satellite feeds in the officer's command center, weren't present in the operations lab and failed to either prevent the massacre or be caught up in it. And to be fair, they didn't much care. The tanks were free to destroy everything that moved along the forward battle area, a job they executed with ruthless and brutal efficiency.

Only a single young operator, who'd stepped out to use the washroom, managed to escape. Tasha hijacked a maintenance vehicle and dropped from the facility, taking the controls only moments before the vehicle crashed into the sea. The patrols overhead ignored her, distracted by the news from the research station. By the time the generals realized a possible witness was at large, Tasha had long since vanished.

Ashley recognized her photo. She remembered the chaos that followed her Father's completion of the tanks. The war in San Diego was over, but the method used to accomplish the victory had left the American citizenry sick to its stomach. Much of the blame had fallen on Fox's shoulders for designing the tanks. Tasha had never publicly testified, and Fox was the only one who knew where she had gone.

The in-house security video of the control room shoot-out was somehow leaked to the press, and the truth of the soldiers' actions, as well as the loss of Andrew's brother Geoffrey, silenced the interest in seeing Fox take the fall for the debacle.

A short time later, a new task was presented to Dr. Fox: Project Epsilon.

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## Chapter 19 - Major Ross

Something drew Ashley's attention from the screen. Several adults were looking in her direction.

A Chinese man across the room caught and held her gaze. He was wearing traditional silk clothes, a hat and small round sunglasses. His long white hair was pulled into a loose braid behind him. He looked as though he was trying to communicate something to her, but a movement to her right distracted her.

Four men approached the carol. Ash shook Geoffrey, rousing him, but in his drowsy condition, he was in no shape to run.

The four men were dressed in street clothes, but it was obvious they were law enforcement agents of some sort. Ash noticed they were wearing their sunglasses inside. She wanted to roll her eyes, but she didn't dare look away from them.

"Ashley and Geoffrey Fox, I need to ask you to come with me."

"We're not going anywhere with you."

"You don't have a choice about it."

"I can scream. I can call the police."

"Knock yourself out," he said, stepping into arm's reach.

As the agent grabbed her shoulder, Ashley leapt from the chair, kicking him in the crotch. He went down with a grunt, obstructing the other men's path to the children.

Ashley pulled Geoff from the carol, and they slipped into the rows of books. The library wasn't huge, but it was large enough. Ash and Geoff sprinted down the narrow aisles, moving faster than adults could in such confined spaces. They zigged and zagged, slipped around assistants and stayed quiet in their flight.

Then, as they neared the front door, with one wrong turn it was over. They came out into the central lobby. The four-man squad stood right ahead of them. The agent she'd kicked stepped up and backhanded her across the face, knocking Ashley from her feet.

The other civilians in the lobby all stopped what they were doing. There was one grey-haired man who looked as large and as dangerous as the agents. He'd been sitting near Ash and Geoff all morning. Ashley recalled that he'd arrived at the same time as she and Geoff. He'd actually even held the door open for them. Now he stood with the other civilians, quietly.

One of the soldiers grabbed Geoff's arm. Ashley scrambled to her feet. The agent who'd hit her stepped in and restrained her before she could reach her brother. He held her arms back and leaned down to her ear.

"You're quite a brat, aren't you?" He looked up to the other plainclothesmen, "Let's get this garbage out of here."

As the soldiers turned toward the main doors with their charges in tow, the grey haired man stepped forward, in front of the doors, obstructing their progress. He held up a badge and asked, "Is there a problem here?"

One of the soldiers reached for his gun, but the man with the badge stepped forward and struck him in the jaw. The agent went down, unconscious. The men holding Ashley and Geoff couldn't draw their weapons in a reasonable amount of time.

The grey haired man was already holding his, pointing it at the only agent with free hands. "Anyone else wants to play, I open fire. Now, let the children go while we wait here for the police."

The soldiers hesitated.

The grey haired man cocked his pistol and switched his aim to the forehead of the man holding Ashley. He released her and his partner released Geoff.

The grey haired man gestured for Ash and Geoff to get behind him. Once they moved behind him, he said over his shoulder, "Get out of here."

Ashley opened the door and pulled Geoff out with her. As she stepped out of the library, she realized she'd seen that man before. He was familiar. She'd seen him at her home, last summer for a barbecue. He was a friend for their father's. She was sure of it.

Ashley heard the lead agent threaten her father's friend. "Look, the kids are gone, fine. But we're not sticking around for the cops."

"You see this badge," the grey haired man answered. "That's the Defense Security Service. You're not cleared to know anything about this project, not even those children's names. The knowledge alone can put you in Leavenworth for twenty years. You're waiting here, or you're getting shot. It's up to you."

As they reached the sidewalk, Ashley and Geoff heard the gunfire erupt behind them. Then the grey-haired man, Ashley remembered his name,

Ross. He was a soldier, Major Ross. Now he was out of the building and moving down the steps.

"Run!" Ross said. "Run!"

Ashley grabbed Geoff's hand and sprinted from down the block. Behind her, the library doors burst open again. She didn't look back, but heard Ross and the agents firing behind her. Bullets whizzed by her head and then she and Geoff made a turn, carrying them out of the line of fire.

Back at the library, Ross had ducked behind a car, pinning the agents to the library doorway and preventing their pursuit.

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From his mobile command center, Von Kalt watched the library surveillance feeds. He wanted to know who'd been responsible for the soldiers who'd gone missing. Stanwood had dismissed it as a rival department, but Von Kalt couldn't let it go.

Now, watching the shootout between Ross and his agents, he couldn't help but think it may have been the soldier. Ross would have known enough to leave the radio transmitters, but then why remove the bodies in the first place?

This shootout hadn't been anything special. Ross wasn't shooting to kill; he was going out of his way *not* to kill these men. Whatever had happened to his agents in the forest, it hadn't been Ross. It hadn't been the children. The issue tugged at Von Kalt's mind. Something, someone close to the device had been responsible. The Metachron wanted to know who that was and so did Von Kalt.

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A car swerved to the curb in front of Ashley and Geoff, they froze. Ross popped open the hatch, "Get in," he said. Ross looked to be bleeding from at least two gunshot wounds to the midsection and another to his left shoulder.

"Hurry up," he said, with a calm that belied his injuries.

Ash slowly approached the car; Geoff trailed along behind her

"Come on, they're going to be here any second, and I need your help."

Ashley put her right hand into her back pocket and awkwardly slipped into the transport. Geoff climbed in and sat next to her. The door closed behind them, and they lifted off.

Ross let the autopilot handle the navigation. He turned the seat away

from the console and faced them, taking a deep breath. "So, now, when you're running, there are three things you need to be aware of." Ross didn't waste time.

"Running?" Geoff asked.

"Three rules," Ross snapped his fingers, cutting off Geoff's interruption.

"One, family first. Trust no one. Well, trust each another, but no one else. As long as you've got each other, that's all that matters."

The grizzled veteran waited for some kind of acknowledgment. Ash nodded and elbowed Geoff who did likewise.

"Number Two. Never go anywhere you can't escape from. No small places. No confined spaces. Know your exits or don't go in."

The brother and sister nodded, the message was clear.

"Three. Never go back, anywhere, twice, not ever. Never ever go anywhere twice. Repeat them, now, one two three, please."

Ash looked to Geoff and nodded. "Family first," Ashley said.

"Family first," Geoff repeated.

"Two..." Ash started.

"Don't get trapped," Geoff jumped in.

"Don't get trapped," Ash nodded.

"And three, don't go anywhere twice, ever," the trio said together.

"That's right. It's a big world. Plenty to see and never get bored." Ross seemed moderately pleased. "Okay, now. Four things you need to survive. Some people say three, I say four. Here they are food, water, information and energy. To get any of them, you can use cash."

This took a second to sink in for Ashley. Geoff remained stoically quiet.

Ross seemed weary; he relaxed into the chair and took slow breaths.

"Trust no one? What about you?" Ashley asked.

"Don't trust me either. You don't know me from Adam, but I'm wounded and not trying to hurt you at the moment. I need your help more than you need mine right now. Besides, you have a knife in your hand."

"You work for my father," Ashley said, ignoring his knowledge of the device in her pocket.

"I did, until yesterday."

"What happened?"

"You saw what happened," Ross answered.

"I saw..." Ashley let the statement hang unfinished.

"What are we going to do?" Geoff asked.



"We're going to a safe house," Ross said.

"Not Mexico?" Ashley asked.

"No. Why would you do that? That's a horrible idea. What's in Mexico?" Ross asked.

"Mexicans," Ashley said.

"We're not going to Mexico. We're going to Canada. But not yet, we need IDs first and that's going to take almost a week," Ross answered.

Ashley glanced over to her little brother. Geoffrey followed the conversation intently. Ash noticed that he didn't miss a gesture or subtle bit of emphasis. "Are you going to tell us what happened to our parents?"

Ross coughed. "You were there."

"But what happened?" Ashley asked. "Why?"

"That could take years. Hell, I'm not even sure I know." Ross took a deep breath and coughed again, pressing his hand to his side.

"Are you okay?" Ashley asked.

"I'll be fine." Ross dug out his phone. "Hold on, I have to make a call."

Ross leaned back trying to catch his breath and dialed the call. "Reid, hey, it's me."

"Damn, I was beginning to get worried. You're ok?"

"I need you to send a trauma kit over to St. Vincent's."

"We've got a couple there, courtesy of our old friend, Mr. Case."

"Great. I'm sending you the intercepts now. I'm pretty sure it's the NID and his deputy, but I want confirmation. Did you get anything?"

"We've got a location on the missus, but nothing on the doc so far. They haven't sent any updates. It could mean status unchanged or it could mean they've gone in-house. We've got new units in the decanter, but there's no rush. We're one-eighty, however you look at it."

"I need twenty hours before I can travel, if you haven't already wrapped things up by then."

"We can't move until we have both locations. We're sitting on the Federal Pathology Department, once we get confirmation we're moving."

"Any progress on the visas?" Ross asked.

"Everything is approved and in the pipeline. It'll take forty-eight to seventy-two. I'll keep you updated; see you tomorrow."

"See you." Ross relaxed back into the chair.

Geoff looked over to Ashley, silently pleading with her to ask the question he wanted to ask. Despite their separation in age, Ashley and Geoff were still close enough to understand each other with a glance.

"Tell us," Ashley said.

"Tell you what?" Ross asked.

"Tell us what you know," Ashley answered.

"I'll give you a rundown, sure.

"I've known your father since we were kids, went to school with him and a bunch of 'the guys'. Most of them were destined for greatness. I was destined for the officer corps, infantry. I did a good job most of the time, which actually means I excelled at murder on a grand scale. Eventually karma caught up with me and took my leg.

"When your father approached me with the 3 AM project, I have to admit, I was interested. There were seven of us. He took samples mapped our genetic codes. Then we were cloned. Our copies were wired into all manner of armor and vehicles. Your father had found a way to map extra sensory input directly into the brain. He'd also given us the ability to communicate with our wired clones, through that device your holding in your hand right there."

Ashley and Geoff hadn't found any mention of the 3 AM Project in their earlier research. Certainly the amplifier hadn't been mentioned.

"We trained for all sorts of combat and whatever our wired selves experienced, we experienced. I died so many times; I lost count. It's all in a stat file somewhere. And it's all in here, at any rate." Ross pointed to his head.

"You may think your old man was a book worm scientist, but he was not. He was one of the toughest guys I've ever met. His code name was Red, and I'm telling you, we never went on a mission that didn't get wet." Ross leaned back in the chair. The talking seemed to be making him tired.

"Who was that you were on the phone with?" Ashley asked.

"Reid, he's going after your parents right now."

"Going after them?" Geoff asked. "He's rescuing them? Are they ok?"

Ross coughed. "I'm sorry. No, they're... Your parents are dead. Your father was shot. They found your mother; she'd been stabbed. Reid is going after their bodies.

"It may be politically viable to reintroduce clones, to smoke out your parents' killers. And there's still a chance that we can revive them. Science can do lots of amazing things, but a lot of that science was your dad, so...."

"Why couldn't you stop them?"

"These orders were signed very high up the chain. Your father represented a lot of undeclared power. At the highest levels, they don't play by the rules. If you're not with them, you're against them. The greedy bastards betrayed him in order to split up his part of the pie."

"They can do that?" Ashley asked.

"They make it up as they go," Ross answered.

"What do they want with us?" Ashley said. "We're just kids."

"You're not just anything. They want you, they want the evidence," Ross replied.

Ashley held up the prototype. "This evidence?"

"You are the evidence," Ross said.

Ashley turned to look out the window.

After a long pause, Ross spoke. "When negotiations between the government and your father broke down, things unraveled pretty quickly and everyone started improvising. The people in Washington panicked. They were very scared by something your father might have been working on.

"Those agents in the forest... Ashley, I need to ask you, what happened to those agents last night, those soldiers who were chasing you? Did you kill them?"

"Last night?" Ashley asked.

Geoff looked up at her.

"What happened? Do you remember any of it?"

"I remember all of it," Ashley looked at Geoff.

Geoff nodded.

"It was Mr. Dunkirk," Ashley said.

"It was," Geoff said. "We saw him in the trail, just before they caught up to us. But we were running, and we couldn't see what happened. We heard them fighting. We heard gunshots."

"It was him? He was there?" Ross asked.

"He was there," Ashley replied. "And his shirt was covered in blood."

"We didn't know what happened, but if he was already bloody and then stopped six storm troopers cold... You said his name is Dunkirk?"

Geoff said, "Bobby was there too. We saw him too."

"Who's Bobby?" Ross asked.

"Bobby Dunkirk," Ash replied.

Ross cleared his throat. "While you guys were at camp, your father went missing for almost two weeks. He vanished somewhere in the DC area, after a briefing at the White House. He didn't turn up until yesterday, when you saw him at home. We don't know where he was or who held him."

"What are we going to do now?" Ashley asked.

"What did your father tell you to do?"

"He said to head south, to Mexico, until you found us."

"Ha! Mexico, right! Okay, sure, if you're ever all alone, that's exactly

the thing to do. But since I found you, we're going to do a little better than that."

"We're going to make them pay?" Ashley asked.

Geoff was fixated on the traffic outside his window.

"Soon we'll all have new identification and visas for Canada. I'm a software engineer who just got a big contract in Vancouver."

"I don't want to go to Canada," Ashley said.

"How would you know? You've never been there."

"How do you know I've never been there?"

Ross laughed and weakly clutched at his side.

Ashley scowled, "I'm not going to Mexico or Canada. I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to find out who did this. I'm going to find them, and I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill them all." The tears in her eyes and her trembling voice did little to conceal the child's furious anger.

Geoff lowered his eyes to the floor, the streaming weather and vehicles no longer appealing.

No one spoke again until they reached their destination.

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## Chapter 20 - Baking Bombs

The transport settled into a landing trajectory over the small parking garage for the L-shaped motel. It consisted of seven units, four singles and three suites, tucked away in a run down industrial district. They parked in an automated garage, and waited for the door to fully close, before exiting the vehicle.

"We'll wait here while I arrange new documents for us. We're going to set up your room downstairs. You can eat what you like, just don't go outside. There's nothing to see, and there is no such thing as fresh air around here anyhow."

Ashley and Geoff followed Ross from the garage to the central corridor. They could access all seven of the units from the central maintenance passage, as well as the garage and main office. It was obvious the facility had been used as a safe house for several extremely dangerous cases, not all of them successful.

"How long are we going to be here?" Ashley asked.

"A few days. We've got our work cut out for us tonight. Come on, grab those groceries."

Ash and Geoff realized the back of the transport was packed with lots of stuff besides groceries. As they carried bags into the kitchen, the children were hard pressed to find counter space. Ross gestured to the floor, as the table and counters were covered with bags of other supplies.

Ross was briefly possessed by a coughing fit, his hand coming away wet with blood. "There's something I've got to take care of. I'll be back in half an hour. Don't break anything."

Ash and Geoff made several trips from the transport back to the kitchen. Ross had purchased every kind of pot known to man. Some of the bags threatened to rip; they were so full of metal cups, pots and pans. Deeper in the car there were several bags of industrial materials.

After his brief absence, Ross returned to help unpacked the supplies. Physically, he seemed fine. He'd changed into a clean set of clothes, and his

previous injuries weren't troubling him at all, allowing him to instruct the children in the preliminary steps of their new project.

Ashley noted large quantities of sterno, compressed propane canisters, cooking oil, liquid gas, pounds of cornstarch, soap, and then came the surprises. Bags from a hardware store yielded large quantities of nails, ball bearings, glass stones, as well as real stones and granite shards.

Ross smiled and stepped over to the electric stove, he set pots on each of the burners and turned them on to their lowest setting. Then he filled the pots with oil. Once warm, he began to add the thickening agents, the cornstarch and soap. Finally, he showed the kids how to mix in large amounts of alcohol, diesel fuel and finally the sterno. Ashley and Geoff watched as Ross used a spatula to dig the flammable gel from can after can, all emptied into the oil-filled pots.

Geoff turned up his nose at the pungent fuel-like smell of the jellied alcohol. "What are we making?" he asked.

"Munitions," Ross answered.

Geoff looked confused but didn't ask for an explanation.

"Ashley, would you unwrap those ice trays?" Ross asked.

Ash peeled the plastic from the metal ice trays.

Ross looked over to Geoff. "We're making bombs," he said.

Geoff's eyes grew wide with amazement.

Ross gestured to the various boxes of steel nails, glass beads and small ball bearings, "Get a big bowl and start mixing all those together."

An hour later the pots still simmered, the flammable gel bubbling around the magnesium and aluminum shavings Ross slowly mixed in. Once Ross was satisfied that most of the excess water had boiled off, the thick gel was poured and scooped into rectangle cookie sheets covered with waxed paper.

Ross instructed the kids to pour a layer of nails, glass and sand over the gel. Finally, another thin layer of oily gel was poured over the soon-to-become shrapnel. The 'pies' were topped off with a wet layer of sand and small rocks and wrapped in foil. The pots and pans were soon filled and stacked to cool in the otherwise empty refrigerator.

Ross showed Ash and Geoff how to assemble detonators from a quantity of plastic tubing and a spool of wire. He clipped off six-foot lengths and taped them inside the plastic. He taped up one end of the tube filled it with gel, squeezed through the clipped corner of a plastic bag. Once finished, the tubes were inserted into the pots and cookie sheets of explosives.

Before long the supplies were nearly used up. The pots and pans had

filled the fridge and freezer. Ross and the children had also used most of the drinking glasses.

Ross showed the children the best ways to wire the rooms and hallways; together they laid out a fairly complex defense grid. They chose the downstairs apartment as the command post, running all the surveillance cables and detonation wires through a hole in the floor of a closet.

The foil wrapped pots were set in front of doors, behind doors, and to the sides of doors. They were also set well away from the doors, in the middle of rooms, trays and cups could be set against the few items of furniture, or under the liberal pieces of newspaper or magazines.

Corresponding surveillance cameras were set up for each position, along with trip wires for the places that the cameras didn't cover. Ross showed the children how to mount an armed cookie sheet on the wall of the shower and attach the trip wire to the shower curtain. Or to rig an armed cup above a door, so once opened, the cup falls and detonates directly between the door and intruder.

In one of the entry rooms, they placed several charges in a large copper tub and set it on its side. In front of it, they stacked a few books and added some crumpled paper bags. From the back, you could see the insulated wires, secured to the floor by duct tape, but from the front, you could see nothing.

By the time Ross and the kids secured the last of the wires, it was well past midnight. They'd eaten light meals of fruit and energy bars throughout the night, pausing for a break every couple of hours, but they were exhausted and still not finished yet.

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In their designated basement command center, Ross set up the sleeping bags he'd picked up for the kids. He brought down clean plastic wrapped mattresses from the storeroom, to set under the sleeping bags.

The lower room was rather spare. There was a couch, which had been pushed back against a wall to make room for the mattresses and conference table. The table came with no corresponding chairs and held boxes of electrical equipment.

Ross sorted the dozens of cables, running in from the various wings of the facility. There were three suites, four singles and one group of rooms for the administration. The small patio sported sun bleached chairs, a plate-glass table with no plate-glass and a shallow pool that had long ago evolved into a shallow weed-infested garden.

Once they finished setting the individual charges, Ross asked Geoff and Ash to help him connect the monitors to the surveillance camera feeds. The monitors blinked to life and soon displayed the various cameras spread throughout the seven grouped toilets and their adjoining showers, closets and sleeping environments.

Ross showed the children how to create and label the wiring grid, from scratch. He laid out the rough diagram of the facility on a large wooden board and tacked a nail at the top left, where he tied the motley crew of labeled and taped-off detonation cables.

There were at least four cables for each of the rooms, the suites having six and the caretakers' quarters sporting eight. The hallway was a maze of nearly invisible tripwires; their charges covered by debris. Several cameras covered a dozen wired explosives, camouflaged among the tripwires. There were half a dozen cameras and an equal number detonation cables running from the garage.

Ross wrote numbers on the board, flawlessly remembering where they'd set the munitions. He drew dotted lines denoting the concealed tripwires and doubled the drawing below, quickly sketching the garage. Once he'd finished numbering the diagram he handed Ashley the hammer and a remaining box of nails. "To the right and up from the numbers, please," he said.

Ross moved to the outside edge of the board, and for each of Ashley's nails, he hammered a nail along the edge. Ross attached extensions to the incoming wires and after peeling back the insulation, tied the bare wire around the nails. It was clear he'd set up the rooms anticipating a rooftop entry, or through the balcony. The central hallway was the most defended position, as it led to the basement stairs.

Ross explained how to manipulate the matrix based on which screens showed intruders. "If they show up in room two, entering from the balcony, to the living room; hit switch 2LR, detonating the living room. Those pots we set behind the thin closet doors and the flat pan, mounted to the back of that old framed poster," Ross said.

He went on until the children clearly understood which cameras represented which rooms on the board. There were almost sixty separate devices, not counting the ones with old-fashioned tripwires. Ashley calculated probably one hundred in all.

Ashley and Geoff bunked down behind the surveillance screens. They could easily access the triggers, and the armor plate set against the legs of the table concealed them from anyone who actually made it down the stairs and



through the rigged basement hallway.

The couch sat to the side of a small square hatch that opened to an empty sedan. The old car was garaged in a break away housing, designed to be dropped from the building at the touch of a button. Should all the above defenses fail, Ashley and Geoff would retreat to the sedan and trigger a massive final explosion, dropping them and the car away from the house, as if just another piece of debris.

By the end of the night, it had become clear to Ashley that Ross has given the same speech a dozen times. She can tell by the leading questions he asks that he's aware of the answers and the knowledge that will be imparted to the student. She suspects he's taught dozens of agents or officers the fundamentals of wiring a safe house.

Ross tucked the children in, explaining that there were a couple of errands he had to run and that he'd return in a few hours.

"Wait. There's something I want to ask you," Ashley said.

"What's that?" Ross asked.

"Before we leave, for Canada or wherever you want to go, before we leave, there must be some evidence at home. My dad had a great security system. There must be some evidence, a recording."

"I don't know. That's pretty risky. And we don't even know if it would show anything. They probably got to it already, and it's way too risky for all of us to go. We've got a few days. I'll check it out before we go, but I'm not promising anything. And just so we're clear, once our paper comes through, we are leaving, and that is non-negotiable."

After a light meal, Ross tucked them into their fortified suite. As he closed the door, Ashley stopped him. "Aren't we breaking rule number two?"

"Have you ever been here before?" Ross asked.

"Of course not, but you have, haven't you? It looks as if it's been through a war."

"Yeah, but not any war you or I were ever a part of. This is a safe house all right, but not for the cops or the feds. This is mob house," Ross said with a grin. "We got a hold of it in a judgment against one of the families. I actually made some of these bullet holes myself."

"Nice," Ashley smiled.

"Now, lock the door and set the shotgun in the brace, like I showed you, and I'll see you in the morning," Ross said.

Ashley set the Mossberg in the metal brace, as he'd shown her, and positioned it in a chair, in front of the door. She ran the trigger line from the spool through the brace, past the trigger guard and out to the door. Where the

line passed the trigger, she attached the lanyard and clipped it to the line. It was done, armed. If the locks were picked and the door was opened in the night, the line would retract, spinning back on the spool, pulling the clip and lanyard fitted over the trigger, firing the gun. Ashley had been careful to position the chair, so the weapon wouldn't go off until the door cleared the Mossberg's barrel.

Ashley had Geoff watch how she tested the brace by opening the door with a second cord; and even though the shotgun was empty, she didn't stand right in front of it.

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## Chapter 21 - Wireless Geoff

Geoff had been uncharacteristically quiet over the past twelve hours. He'd set himself up on the couch in front of the TV. From the look on his face Ash could tell he wanted to talk. Finished with the Mossberg, she sat next to her brother on the couch.

"What do you want to watch?" she asked.

His answer came quietly, almost hollow, "I don't want to watch anything." His eyes vacantly glued to the dark screen.

"I saw what happened to dad," Geoff said. "You thought I didn't, but I did. And I heard mom scream before we got very far from the house."

"You heard her?"

"Didn't you?" Geoff asked.

"I don't think so, no. I was running," Ash said.

"You were pulling me really hard."

"Sorry," Ashley said.

"It's okay. We're okay, right?" Geoff asked.

"I guess."

"Do you think what Colonel Ross said is true? Mr. Dunkirk killed those cops?" Geoff asked.

"Bobby sure thought so."

"And he said it was because of the thing."

Ashley pulled the rectangle out of her pocket and held it up. "Did you know what dad could do with this?" Ash asked, setting it on the table in front of them.

Geoff reached out and picked it up. For a moment, he closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and spoke. "He could use it to talk with the computers, directly, with his brain. He invented it. That's why they're after him. That's why they killed him."

Ashley took a breath. "Why didn't he just give it to them?"

"He tried to. That's how you got it. A lot of people really didn't want it. They said it killed people. Sometimes, the first time they touched it, they died. Then, also, there was a big explosion out in the desert."

"Remember what happened when it fell. Remember how everything was frozen?" Geoff asked. "Did you think it would kill me?"

Ashley shook her head. "It's just a chunk of metal. Until you hit the button and pop out the knife, you can't hurt yourself with it."

"What do you see when you pick it up?" Geoff asked.

"What do you mean?" Ashley said. "I just see it. In my hand."

"I don't know what it is, but it's not a knife. Who told you that?"

Ashley didn't answer.

"You don't see anything? When you hold it?" Geoff asked.

"Hit the button," Ash said. "It's a knife."

"It's a power button," Geoff said. "It doesn't really turn it on. Contact turns it on."

"Hit the button," Ashley said again.

Geoff pressed down on the button. Nothing happened. He pressed again. Still nothing. "It doesn't do anything."

"You're not pressing hard enough," Ash said, holding out her hand.

Geoff gave her the metal rectangle. Ashley pressed the button, hard, with her thumb, and with a loud crack, the black metal blade snapped out.

"Damn," Geoff said, with mock amusement. "It's probably not even sharp." He reached for the blade.

Ashley let him take it from her.

Geoff ran the knife over the back of his forearm and watched as the blade effortlessly shaved all the short hair from his young arm. "Whoa!! Wow!" Geoff said.

"Be careful with it, Geoff!" Ashley said.

"Okay, okay. But really, that's nothing. Nothing at all compared to what it can actually do. Listen, did you know all the cameras have a dormant network IO?" Geoff set the knife on the table.

"Io?" Ashley asked. She picked up the dark blade and hit the button again, retracting the edge.

"In, Out. And okay, what about this..." Geoff closed his eyes and paused for a moment.

The video stream on the table across from the couch clicked on. The monitor changed streams until arriving on one of Geoff's favorite cartoons. A moment later the lights in the room clicked off. Then, in truly immature fashion, the lights clicked on and off over and over again.

"Okay, I get it," Ash said.

Geoff smiled and opened his eyes.

"Could you turn the lights back on now?" Ash asked.

Laughing, Geoff got up and ran across the room, to switch on the lights.

"Why walk, why not just think it?" Ash asked.

"Ha! I don't know. It's easy to get out, but takes a while to get back inside the systems," Geoff said.

Ashley stared at her little brother.

"What?" he asked.

"What do you see?"

"It's like having a computer in your head." Geoff answered.

"Can you see it right now?" Ashley asked, holding the device.

"No." Geoff looked at the tactical switchblade - slash - ultimate computer interface in his sister's hand.

"Do you have to be holding it?" Ashley asked.

"I don't know. Let's see." Geoff closed his eyes.

The lights went off.

"So, no." Ashley said.

In the dark, Geoff opened his eyes. "You have to concentrate," he said.

Ashley looked at it and then set it back on the table. "You can have it."

"I want to try something." Geoff closed his eyes. A moment later he said, "Okay, I'm in. I want you to take it way over there." Geoff pointed to the furthest part of the basement.

"Okay," Ashley answered. She picked up the device and carried it across the basement. She didn't rush, she walked kind of slowly, prepared to stop whenever Geoff might object, but he didn't.

When she set the device down, Geoffrey screamed and jumped up. Ashley ran back over to him, the device forgotten.

Geoff was gasping for breath and looked panicked.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm ok," Geoff replied. "What happened?" he asked.

"I just set it down," Ash answered.

"Wow. It really didn't like that," Geoff said. "Where is it?" he asked.

Ash led her brother back to the device. He picked it up and offered it to her.

"You can hold onto it," she offered, pulling it out.

"No, It's yours. I can use it, but you have to carry it," Geoff said.

"Whatever." Ash returned the amplifier to her pocket.

Geoff staggered and rubbed his head. "Man!" Geoff shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Ashley asked.

"Nothing! It's ..." Geoff exhaled sharply then took several deep breaths. "Hold on," he said.

"When you're holding it, damn! It's strong. The signal is so strong. But..." Geoff moved across the room. "Only if I'm right next to you."

"Then why don't you carry it?" Ashley asked.

"Are you kidding? No way! This is tons better!" he said, smiling.

Ash got nothing more out of him that afternoon. She flipped through bad video streams while Geoff lay on the couch next to her, eyes closed, but never asleep.

The next morning when Ash woke, Geoff was stretched out on the couch, fast asleep. She pulled up the security feeds on the vid stream and once she was sure all was well, she disengaged the shotgun. After showering and spending the better part of an hour in the bathroom, Ashley still hadn't seen any signs of life from her younger brother.

Ash left the suite to find food. She also found Ross in the kitchen near the main offices, halfway through preparing a generous breakfast.

"I let you guys sleep in today. Tomorrow that stops." Ross set a cup of juice and a few slices of fruit before her. "I have to run a bunch of errands, so today is the last day of the rest of your... of your old life."

"And that means what exactly?"

"I don't know, eat cereal, watch cartoons, keep the shotgun in the brace and keep the line tied to the knob till I call you."

"Till you call me? Why don't you just knock?"

"Knock on a brace? Don't you ever! I had a buddy who knocked once, lightly. It was just enough to knock the line off the knob, cut him in half. Don't ever knock. If you do ever knock, stand off to the side."

Ross handed Ashley a phone. "There's one number programmed into this. It's the only number I want you to use it for, only in emergencies. Otherwise, just answer it if it rings."

Ashley picked up the phone and looked at it,

"Don't even open it unless it rings. You got me?"

Ashley nodded.

Ross finished with the pancakes and set a short stack in front of Ash. "Where's your brother," he asked.

"He was asleep when I left. Guess yesterday was a lot for him."

"You're probably right." Ross looked around the kitchen, rinsed a few dishes and piled a few others. "I have to go. Lots to do. Make sure he eats, yeah?" Ross said.

Ashley nodded.

Ross came around from the back of the small kitchen counter and patted Ashley's shoulder. "It's going to be okay."

Ashley smiled, but something dangerous in her eyes made Ross pause.

"What?" Ross asked.

"It is going to be okay," Ashley said. "I can just feel it." Ashley took a bite of her pancakes, grinning devilishly.

Ross laughed.

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## Chapter 22 - Feedback Loop

**Monday, July 29th, 2313**

After eating, Ashley found a vacant basement room to stretch and do her exercises. The basement, actually beneath the garage, hadn't been wired the day before. There was little point. It was almost entirely self-contained. There was one entrance, and despite some separation walls, it was open and empty.

When Ashley finally returned to the room she was sharing with her brother, she found him still stretched out on the couch. "Geoff, you missed breakfast. There are pancakes out there if you want them. Pretty good."

"Ash, how's it going?" Geoff's voice was calm, but distracted.

Ashley looked over at her brother. He was still lying on his back, eyes closed.

"What's the matter with you? Aren't you getting up today?"

"I've been up," he said. With his eyes closed, Geoff maneuvered into a sitting position, letting the blanket cover his legs. "I barely slept."

Ashley walked around to the front of the couch. "What? You're serious?"

Geoff reached out, with his eyes closed, picked up the black metal rectangle and flawlessly tossed it to his sister.

Ashley remained silent until he opened his eyes. Geoff was smiling at her.

"Can you show me how?" Ashley asked.

Geoff smiled and nodded. "It's easy. Here, sit down."

Ashley sat next to him, holding the device in her hands.

"Close your eyes and imagine a blank vid screen."

"Okay," Ashley said, her eyes closed.

"First, you just see black space. Then one word is going to come up..." Geoff said.

Ashley was quiet for a few moments. "What word?"

"Just relax and wait for it," Geoff answered.



They both waited quietly.

Then Ashley caught her breath. "Micron... Micronix."

"That's its name," Geoff said.

"What now?" Ash said.

"Tell it your name."

"How?"

"Just imagine the letters, then it opens an operating system."

Ashley was quiet for a few moments. Then it appeared. A screen in her head, filling her field of vision, it displayed a group of typical computer operating system of icons and folders. The system was named Micronix, below it, a second item with Ashley's full name - Ashley Erin Fox.

Ash focused on the icon above her name and found that it contained several common computer folders; applications, contacts, documents, networks, utilities. The folder for applications opened, it was filled with basic skills, memory, comprehension, mathematics, reasoning. She opened contacts and a box headed with the words Micronix Op Sys opened and flashed 'Importing Contacts'.

Ashley felt a sharp twinge throughout her head and discovered four sub groups on the screen - family, friends, classmates and acquaintances.

Ashley backed out a level and opened the object named Networks, a box headed with Available Networks opened, listing several. Ashley clicked on the top, a ten-digit number.

The phone in her pocket rang. She fished it out and answered it. An ear splitting feedback loop erupted over the phone and Ashley's voice box. She screamed, threw the phone along with the device, and collapsed.

Geoff had realized what was happening when the phone rang, only a moment too late. He jumped up and rushed over to his sister.

Ash was out cold.

"Oh, my God! Ashley! Are you okay?" Geoff listened to her heart; she was still breathing and despite her suddenly being unconscious, she seemed okay.

"Holy shit," Geoff said to no one. He retrieved the amplifier and her phone and set them on the table.

When Ashley woke, she was alone. She found Geoff in the kitchen, finishing the remainder of the pancakes.

"That was not fun," Ashley said.

Geoffrey smiled, but wisely refrained from laughing.

The rest of the afternoon went pretty quietly. Geoff spent the day in

Micronix-land while Ashley stretched again, practiced again, watched a movie and napped.

By nine, Ross had still not returned. Ash cooked them a dinner of frozen pizza.

Neither the device, nor the phone had moved from where Geoff set them. Geoff had found no difficulty in accessing the device without either of them being in direct contact with it.

Ashley had no interest in exploring the cyber-verse as represented by the black tool-of-vengeance, as she saw it. To her it was a knife, a bit more dangerous than most, but still and primarily, a knife.

At four in the morning, Ashley's phone went off again. She answered, still groggy with sleep.

Ross's voice came both over the phone and from right outside the door. "Time to get up. I want you and the little guy dressed and in the kitchen in five minutes."

A few minutes more than five minutes later, Ashley and Geoff walked quietly down the maintenance hall toward the kitchen. The lights were still off, and no light came in from behind the pulled shades and blinds.

Ross intercepted the children halfway to their destination. "First things first..."

After early morning patrols, the three of them would have breakfast and come up with ways to improve security. At lunch, Ross discussed the finer points of distributing weapons, ammunition and first aid supplies at key locations throughout the facility. He explained that you had to approach the subject of fortification as if you were actually in a real attack. "Where would you want weapons and ammo stashed during a firefight?" he asked.

"The bathroom. It has a reinforced tub and a window you can escape out of. And because you have water." Geoff said.

"It's a bit of a tie, actually, between the bathroom and the kitchen," Ross smiled. "The bathroom can be more defensible, even better, provided you have a potential escape, but for the most part, bathrooms are kill boxes. There's almost never a way out, plus lots of tile and glass. Rule is: If you don't know it, don't go in."

"The kitchen is better for hiding a greater amount of weapons and ammo, and there's usually a backdoor, but it's mostly open and indefensible. This is an L-shaped unit here, they will believe that our transportation is out in the garage, and that's where we'll go."

"So that will be the first thing they go after," Geoff said,

"Exactly right. They'll try to disable any escape," Ross said.

"So that means they'll be watching the other exits too, right?" Ashley asked.

"Depends. We've got two sets of bad guys to worry about here: those with limited budgets and exposure and those without limits. That means, the people who want to keep their activity a secret and those who can openly send forty agents after us."

"They're going to keep looking for us, as long as we have this." Ashley pulled out the black rectangle and set it on the counter next to Ross's maps.

Ross smiled. "They don't want that, despite how valuable it is. That's just a piece of hardware. They want you. They want the wetware, in your head."

"Loose ends," Ashley said. "We're just loose ends."

"You're not 'just' anything," Ross said. "They want me, Mr. Reid, and a couple of other guys, we're loose ends. That's all about containment. You're about profit and curiosity. We stay together, we stay alive, and we go to Canada."

"I don't want to run. I don't want to go anywhere," Ashley said.

"I want my old life back and I want them dead." Ash said, coldly.

Both Geoff and Ross remained silent for a few moments.

"In the trash cans," Geoffrey said. "Under the garbage bags."

"What?" Ross asked.

"In the bathrooms, that's where we put the guns," Geoff smiled.

Ross nodded and smiled. "I've mapped out the best escape routes."

He laid out some local maps, showing the nearby streets and buildings. "There's a twenty-four hour public parking structure here. If you have to detonate this place, go there." Ross pointed to a square four blocks from their location. "And another one here," Ross pointed to a second location, on the other side of the map.

"Whichever direction you find yourselves going, just go. You can get to either of them almost unseen by taking this street and this alley, here." Ross laid out the trail with his finger on the map. "I traced it yesterday. Once you get there, in each garage is a black transport. Ditch the sedan."

Ross handed them an electric key. "Hit the button and the closest one will come to you."

"We're going to be the Roberts family; Ashley, your new name is Erin. Geoff, you are Michael, and I am Michael Senior. Once we're over the border, we pick up a second set. All we have to do is get there."

"Did you get a chance to check on the security footage?" Ashley asked.

"I checked. The house looks secure, but I spotted three roving patrols and two stationary units in the neighborhood. It was too dangerous to go inside."

"We should just go after them, find out who they're working for."

"It's not that easy?"

"We can't just let them get away with it," Ashley argued.

"They already did," Ross said.

"What's the point of learning how to fight and fortify your base, if you're just going to run all the time?" Ash asked.

"You're too young," Ross said. "And if they catch us, you're not getting any older."

"They know you're helping us. They're going to have the borders covered. They won't be expecting us to attack."

"That's a very dangerous game. Plus, they will immediately destroy any evidence we don't already have. As much as you may want this, we don't have the resources."

"I'm not leaving," Ashley was serious.

Geoff looked at her, shocked.

"I'm going after them. My father was a good person. He never hurt anyone and our mom was super-nice. They killed her, and I'm not just going to run away and forget."

"Ashley, we're just kids," Geoff said.

"No, Geoff! I'm going to find out who did this, and I'm going to stop them!"

Geoff and Ross were both quiet in the wake of her determination.

Finally, Ross spoke. "We still have some time, but we need to be prepared to escape at any moment. There is such a thing as overwhelming firepower and the odds are against us."

"Maybe we can use the Micronix to get the footage," Geoff suggested. "We just need to move to a slightly more wired community. There's not enough bandwidth here for me to get inside."

"We need to set a trap," Ash said. "Catch someone who knows something and make an example out of him. If they're staking out our house, then let's get one of them. I'll make him talk. You don't have to do anything." Ashley was deadly serious.

"Too many things can go wrong. One of you could get hurt. We could be seen or followed. There's too few of me here to try that. I appreciate your

motivation, but you're still kids. We'll try Geoff's plan, tomorrow. End of discussion," Ross said.

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## Chapter 23 - Counter Surveillance

Wednesday, July 31st, 2313

The next day Ross, Ash and Geoff climbed out of the transport outside an upscale park in a high class business / residential district.

"Oh, this is great," Geoff said, looking at all the trees and smiling.

"What, being out in nature?" Ross asked.

"No, the bandwidth, it's really thick out here."

"This is not nature," Ashley mumbled, referring to the floating structure they stood on.

"Wow," Geoff was amazed, grinning as he took a seat on a nearby park bench. "Ash, you brought it?"

Ashley patted her back pocket.

"We can stay out here all day!" Geoff laughed.

"No, we can't. Stay on task, Geoffrey." Ross didn't even smile.

"Copy that, stay on target, Gold Leader." Geoffrey grinned.

Ashley watched an older Chinese man practice Tai Chi across the park. He seemed utterly absorbed in what he was doing, as if nothing in the world could disturb him. Ashley was envious of his moment of peace. She hoped someday she would reach his esteemed age and find a park of her own.

Two men walked along the sidewalk, distracting her from the old man. Ashley watched them closely. They weren't mercenaries or government agents, just executives taking lunch. Ashley watched them, and the young woman walking opposite.

Ashley watched all the people moving through the park. Ross watched too. Geoffrey sat between them, leaning back, his eyes closed.

An hour or so later, Geoff took several deep breaths, then spoke in a barely audible whisper, "You have to keep it. Keep it safe. There is another. It wants to destroy it. The other, it's pure evil. It wants to kill us and destroy the device. The Micronix."

"What are you talking about?"

“Dad had it. He had both of them. But he doesn’t have it now. It’s out there. And it’s looking for us.”

Ashley shook her brother by the shoulder. “Geoff, Geoff. Wake up.”

Geoff blinked awake. “What? What happened?”

“Yeah, what happened? What were you just saying?” she asked.

“I wasn’t saying anything.”

Ross glanced at Ash.

“I’m hungry,” Geoff said.

After a long and relatively fruitless morning, the three of them headed across the street for lunch at a local restaurant.

They talked about where Geoff was looking and how to look more effectively, but by the time lunch arrived, Geoff had begun complaining of a headache.

Geoff remained distant during the meal, distracted. Ashley suspected he was still in the network somewhere. Suddenly his eyes rolled back in his head, and he crashed into the table.

His nose bled, but it was unclear whether that was due to his collision with his lunch or if it were some more ominous cause. Ross paid in cash and got them out of the restaurant as quickly as possible.

After an hour of aimlessly cruising the freeways behind tinted glass, they returned to the safe house.

Geoff was glued to the TV, watching footage of the park. After a while, Ashley realized there was no newscaster. She asked him what channel he was watching. Geoff explained he’d hacked into the police band. Ash sat with her brother and watched the footage of the local citizens being interrogated. Von Kalt had flooded the restaurant and park with agents. Everyone for three blocks had been identified and questioned.

The hair on Ashley’s arms stood up as she remembered the man doing Tai Chi. She’d seen him in the library too, staring at her, just before the agents jumped them. He was nowhere to be seen in the police footage, but Ashley was sure it had been the same man. Something about the coincidence disturbed her immensely.

Despite all her extra stretching and practice, Ashley felt agitated. A storm had come in a couple of hours earlier, but it was more than that. Geoff’s reaction to the Micronix had been troubling. Suddenly, her initial reactions felt justified. The prototype was not a toy; it was not something to be casual with.

She had no desire to use the mysterious hunk of metal, either as a weapon or a mental computer connection. Yet somehow, having it with her relaxed her. It had been her father's, and for better or worse, it was all that existed of his legacy.

After dinner, Ross seemed weird, nervous. "Well, I think Geoff may have tripped some alarms somewhere."

Ashley's brow furrowed over her bright blue eyes. He apparently had no idea Geoff continued to peruse the intelligence files over the Micronix device.

Geoff took a deep breath.

"From what I understand, we dodged them by about two stop lights. The whole park was crawling with cops, mercs and feds. They had two fistfights and three arrests, just among each other. Dragged everyone out of the restaurant and took them downtown. Then went and found everyone else who had lunch there and brought them in too. Always pay in cash."

"This is bad, huh?" Ashley asked.

"I don't know," Ross answered. He looked at Geoff. "How bad is it?"

"Well. It's taken me a little to put it together, but I think it's maybe, pretty bad. They've got bounties out on us, eight actually. They're calling Ross a kidnapper and they're offering five hundred thousand for you, dead or alive, with an additional bonus of four hundred for each of us, if they bring us in alive."

"That's over a million dollars," Ashley said.

"We need to know who it is that's offering that kind of scratch," Ross said.

"The Angel City Police Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff, State of California Police, FBI, CIA, NSA, DOD and DARPA, all reporting to the office of the National Intelligence Director," Geoff replied.

"We can't go after everyone. Who gave you the nose bleed?" Ross asked.

"All he said was, 'This is Eel,' and then, bam and I was down."

"The Electric Eel, damn. I've heard of that guy. I know the FBI has full-time operators hardwired into their defense grid, but he probably just thought he was shutting down your system. How could he know he was shorting-out our head?"

"Anyhow, the documents are coming in today. So I want you guys to be ready to go as soon as I get back with them."

"What about the storm?" Ashley asked.

"Visibility is for shit, radio comms are all fouled up, you couldn't ask for better weather; the Gods are smiling on us," Ross answered.



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### **Friday, August 2nd, 2313**

Geoff woke Ashley some time after two. He shook his sister and whispered her name. "Ash, wake up, they're here."

Ashley woke with a start. "What?" She rubbed her face. "Where's Ross?"

"He left a couple of hours ago. Look." Geoff pointed to the security monitors.

On three of the seven balconies, dark forms huddled in front of the glass doors, cutting circles in the glass. Almost simultaneously, they cracked circles of glass from the doors and unlocked the sliding panels by simply reaching in.

Ashley appreciated the old-school nature of the situation. The balcony doors at this hotel certainly weren't voice operated, or even digitally wired. The attacking soldiers had prepared appropriately.

The first tripwire was hit, and the three soldiers in unit four were blown out through the balcony doors. Two lay crumpled and bleeding, while the third was blown from the balcony all together. From this elevation, if his injuries didn't kill him, his impact with the ocean below surely would.

Ashley and Geoff watched the remaining the soldiers in rooms two and six. They didn't move. Using a flashlight, the lead man in two identified one of the monofilament tripwires. He crept toward the charges attached to the line, brushing away a piece of newspaper.

Ashley took the open wire and touched it to the appropriate peg, shredding the room with steel and glass.

Geoff tugged at Ashley's elbow as a wall of the garage was blown out. On the monitors, a small group of soldiers entered, detaching their fast-drop lines before moving deeper into the garage.

Ashley waited until they were aligned with the wired trashcan before blowing it. The blast separated the soldiers, slashing into the soft spots between their armor plates, lacerating vital organs and arteries.

The soldiers in room six had not moved since the first blast. Ashley held the live wire close to the peg for 6LR. Six was largest of the suites; subsequently it contained more explosives. After some time, one soldier straightened up a bit and took one step backward, toward the balcony.

Another soldier shook his head and pressed deeper into the unit. The third man stood his ground, neither advancing nor retreating. The inward

soldier spotted a tripwire and pointed it out to his comrades, slipping toward the charges to defuse them.

Ashley's hovering hand went to the wire and the charges detonated. The soldier attempting to defuse the charge came apart, while his comrades were knocked flat.

"More coming," Geoff said.

"You should get in the car," urged Ashley.

"Not yet, we're okay."

Ashley looked at him.

"They don't have a heat signature on us; the building is shielded somehow," Geoff explained. "I'm tapped into their frequencies, I can hear everything they're saying. We're okay, they know Ross is gone, and they know we're not with him. They're doing a room by room search."

On the monitors, the sliding glass doors of units one and five were shot out by the heavy machine guns of the circling transports.

Three more soldiers came in through the hole in the garage. Ashley triggered another trashcan, knocking them from their feet.

A dozen soldiers landed on the glass-covered balconies of the blown out windows.

"You have to run the board," Ashley said. She took the Micronix out of her pocket and set it on the table. "How good are you with this thing?"

"I'm getting better," Geoff said.

Ashley pulled out the phone Ross gave her. "Do you think you could call me?" she asked, holding it up.

Geoff nodded. "Why?"

"I'm going upstairs," she said.

"You're what?" Geoff said, shocked.

"I'm going up there. They're not all dead yet."

"Yeah Ash! They're not dead yet! Plus, there's going to be more coming!"

She plugged her earphones into the phone. "Can you do it or not?"

A moment later, the phone rang. "Can you hear me?" Geoff asked.

Ashley nodded, smiling. "Come here." Ashley disconnected the shotgun and pulled it from the brace. "You know how to put this back on, right?"

"I can do it," Geoff answered.

Ashley hugged her little brother and slipped out the door.

"Why don't you take it with you?" Geoff asked.

"There's plenty up there. Now lock the door." Ashley grinned.

Geoff locked the door behind her and replaced the shotgun in the  
brace.

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## Chapter 24 - Shotguns and Tripwires

"You're clear to the kitchen," Geoff said, returning to his place in front of the detonation board. Not that he needed to see the monitors, the Micronix provided more surveillance options than the few cameras they'd set up. Geoff was scanning the intruders' radio communications and reading all their internal ship frequencies. There were two attacking vessels, big enough that they could easily carry forty men each. As he relayed the info to his sister, Geoff added; he had no doubt; the assault had just begun.

Ashley crept into the kitchen, pulling a few extra explosive pies from the fridge. There were three exits from the administration offices: into the main lobby, the garage, or the maintenance hallway. In the main hall, off the lobby, the offset doors were all wired to their own sets of charges. Ashley peeked out through the lobby into the hall. Everything was quiet. None of the charges in the hall had been detonated and the lobby doors leading to the garage were closed and quiet.

"Ash," Geoff said, over her earphones. "There's more coming in from the garage; four this time. No wait, six. Oh shit, six more! They're heading to the lobby."

Ashley ducked behind the main counter as the soldiers opened the doors to the garage. The explosives went off in a series of blasts that shook the entire structure.

"They're down," Geoff said. "The guys in one and five are holding still."

Ash stood behind the counter, surveying the damage. The doors had been blown from their hinges and lay out in the lobby. Soldiers lie twitching and groaning or still.

Ashley boldly walked into the garage. She picked up the first loose weapon she came across, a tactical shotgun, very similar to the one downstairs. She clicked the safety off. The smoke hung in the air the way the ringing hung in her ears.

Ashley approached the first soldier. He lay at her feet and moaned. Blood ran from his face and ears. Ashley pointed the shotgun at his head and

squeezed the trigger. It erupted with a boom. She ejected the spent shell and chambered another, just as Ross had shown her.

As she came toward the next man, he objected to the best of his ability, raising his hands and crying, "No, no, no?"

"Who sent you?" Ashley asked, aiming the shotgun at his face.

"Command," he admitted. "We have legal warrants!" The soldier turned his face away from the gun, tension knotting his features.

"Who?" Ashley demanded.

"We were cleared at the top! Highest clearance; National Intelligence Director."

Ashley raised the collapsible stock of the shotgun to her shoulder, aiming in. "What's his name?"

"Director Stanwood! Director Stanwood!" he screamed.

Ashley fired. The name rang in her head, forever chiseled into her memory by the concussion of the blast.

She walked to each of the soldiers in turn. If they were awake enough to answer, she asked who sent them. Some answered her honestly for which she granted them a quick and merciful release from their pain, some didn't, and were rewarded with the loss of a limb. Either way, the result was the same.

From those who were already dead, Ash collected only weapons and ammunition. When the shotgun ran out, she picked up another one. Occasionally she heard the sound of explosives somewhere nearby, but no one interrupted her until she'd finished.

Over and over again Ashley heard the names Stanwood and Von Kalt. When her head stopped ringing, it was her own name she heard being repeated by a little voice inside her head.

"Ashley, do you hear me? Ash? Ashley?" Geoff struggled to be heard her small earphone. "There are more of them! They're coming! You have to get out of there!"

Ashley was all the way across the garage at this point, close enough to the hole in the wall to enjoy a cool breeze blowing in from the night outside. Ashley stepped closer, the fresh air felt good after several days in the stale motel.

Two soldiers suddenly appeared at the hole. Ashley raised the shotgun and fired, causing them to vanish in an explosion of lead and smoke. She quickly armed four pots from the kitchen and set them in front to the hole.

"Hurry, Ash! From number five, they're coming."

Ashley sprinted across the garage and into the kitchen. She grabbed a

few glasses and armed them before slipping through the doors to the lobby. From behind the counter she peered into the hall. It was empty.

Ashley crept around the counter and toward the larger doorway. Number five's doors had already been blown from their hinges. Three men stepped into the hall from blasted room. They carefully picked their way past several of the tripwires.

Once they were close enough, Ashley stepped out to confront them. They hesitated at the sight of a child standing before them, even if she did have a shotgun strapped across her back.

Ashley tossed the glasses and dove into the kitchen. The soldiers raised their weapons and sprayed the area with bullets, missing Ash, but detonating the charges flying toward them. The shrapnel inside shredded them with metal and fire. There was no one left for Ashley to interrogate.

Ashley rushed back through the offices and down the basement stair, set along the back wall. She set more charges behind her as she went. From the units above she heard several more detonations. She crouched before the door to the control room, waiting to see where the explosions stopped. If they advanced into the admin offices above, she'd have to have Geoff open the door. For the moment, they were still confined to the further part of the motel.

After a few moments of silence, Geoff whispered over the phone, "All clear. They're pulling out. *Twenty-four KIA is enough for one evening*, they said."

"I'm going to double check," Ashley said, creeping back up the stairs.

"Okay, but be careful, they could still be alive."

Ash made a careful second sweep of the units. For any found alive, Ashley's question was always the same, "Who sent you?"

"Stanwood and Von Kalt."

Ashley's mercy was consistent and quick. She didn't think about it. She didn't wonder if she was doing the right thing or not. It was almost automatic in the young girl. She didn't care what Geoff might think of what she was doing. She didn't wonder if the enemy was listening over their radios.

It occurred to Ashley that they were answering too easily, almost as if she were asking, "Who's the President of the United States?" The soldiers didn't seem to be giving up 'secret information' in their betrayal of their superiors.

Ashley carried their weapons and ammunition downstairs, lining the walls of their command center. She got a bunch of grenades, which went a long way toward replacing the spent munitions. Ashley used the grenades to re-wire many of the kill zones, refortifying their base.

Ash suspected she kept herself busy because she couldn't bear to face

her little brother, after what she had done. She redoubled her efforts to distract herself from the bothersome thoughts, focusing wholly on the task at hand.

"Ross is here," Geoff said, over the radio.

A moment later Ashley's phone alerted her to the incoming call.

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Ross returned at dawn, the sun's first rays revealing the extensive damage to the motel, as well as the wholesale carnage on the balconies. Ashley hadn't dragged the corpses inside, but rather wired them where they lie, so that might taunt the enemy into returning. For a moment, he worried that perhaps the children had been taken, but his phone hadn't rung, and the breakaway housing for the sedan remained intact.

Ross triggered the remote for the garage bay doors and was greeted by the sight of a dozen dead soldiers, dead and still wet. He immediately noticed that none of them were armed, although he strongly doubted they had arrived that way. He took the cruiser off autopilot and found a section of floor where he wouldn't be setting the transport on top of a corpse.

Ashley and Geoff had disconnected the shotgun from the brace and opened the door.

Ross entered. He did a double take at the dozens of assault rifles and handguns, but quickly recovered. "I have the papers. It is time to go."

"But we know who did it! We have evidence!" Ashley said.

"What evidence?" Ross asked.

"Their confessions! They told me..."

"Before you blew their faces off?"

Ashley hesitated to answer the obvious flaw in her logic.

"You're the only ones who saw any of it, and since the cameras aren't spooling to a disc; it's hearsay. There's no recording of their confessions, and lucky for us, there's no recording of their executions either."

Ashley had no reply.

"Now. Let's get out of here," Ross said.

"We're not just going to leave all these guns?" Ashley asked.

"We *are* leaving all these guns," Ross said.

Geoff suddenly threw himself onto the couch. "They're here! Get Down!"

Ashley and Ross looked at him as if he was crazy, but then two devastating explosions rocked the facility. The structure screamed as it cracked apart in several places. Two more rockets hit, damaging the gravity drive and throwing the motel's horizontal balance into seizures. The plate's ability to stay balanced had been upset, and the facility was losing altitude.

The furniture slid fore and aft, threatening anyone trapped between it and a wall. They dodged the sliding mattresses, the table and various electronics as Ross corralled them toward the sedan.

Geoff made it in first, climbing into the back seat, followed by Ashley, who held the door open for Ross. He climbed in and got behind the driver's seat, starting the car.

Ashley pulled the door closed as the building took a rather severe tilt, throwing her against the glass. Ross triggered the remote to release the breakaway hatch, but the sedan refused to separate from the falling building.

Ross threw the vehicle into drive, trying to pull away by force, but the hatch wouldn't break free. He put the car back in park and opened his door; he'd have to do it by hand.

Before he got out, Ross reached inside his jacket and pulled out the false identification and reservations that would get them safely across the border, handing them to Ashley without a word.

Ash and Geoff watched Ross try to pop the hinges by hand. Finally he pulled out his pistol and shot them off. The first one gave easily, the second practically exploded. The third and fourth ripped free as the car returned to its fixed elevation, rocketing away from the falling motel.

Ash and Geoff watched Ross fall away from them. He stood at the hatch, shrinking as the distance between them increased.

Early that morning, Ross had set them on a return vector toward the Angel City limits. The rockets had intercepted them before they could get inside city lines, where rocket attacks were illegal, but the motel crossed the border during its descent and smashed into an oceanfront community.

The rockets and internal explosions had destroyed the motel's structure. No whole bodies, nothing other than blood, was recovered from the wreckage. The clean up was simpler, but the investigation was a fruitless endeavor.

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## Chapter 24 - Angel City Devils

Ross was gone. Ashley and Geoff were stunned silent. Geoff had tuned the scanner to the police band. The lack of pursuit was unnerving.

"They don't see us!" he said. "They must have been tracking Ross. They didn't know we were there. The whole time you were upstairs, they kept saying that they couldn't get a reading. It must have been the Micronix!"

Geoff sat bolt upright. "Where is it?" He was panicked. "I left it on the table!"

Ash pulled the device from her back pocket.

"It must be jamming their scanners." Geoff looked at her. "Do you ever use it?"

"No. It freaks me out. I don't want it in my head."

Geoff was silent for a long time.

"I don't know how to say this, but I think it thinks."

"What about?" she asked calmly, but with a slight smirk.

"It's very angry." Geoff looked at her, "That's why it likes you so much. You think about the same things."

Ashley raised an eyebrow.

"It wants revenge."

Ash smiled. "What does it want revenge for?"

"Same as you and me, for what they did to dad. And for being separated from its brother."

"Its brother? What are you talking about?"

"There were two of them," Geoff said.

"Who got the other one?" she asked.

"I guess probably whoever got Dad."

"If we're not careful, they're going to get us too."

"Then let's be careful," Geoff said.

Ashley smiled. She pulled up the sedan's pre-programmed destinations and selected the nearest transfer car. She double-checked the black remote key Ross had given her and pulled the lever to recline her seat. Ash and Geoff slept until the autopilot gave its distinctive three rings, announcing that they

had arrived at their destination.

Ashley sat up and looked around. They were in another parking structure, but much busier, more upscale. Ash looked over to the car next to them, an armored black hatchback. She triggered the key, the monster parked next to them came alive, its lights winking, acknowledging the 'unlock' command.

"Geoff, we're here," Ashley woke her younger brother.

Geoff looked around. "Here, where?"

"A mall I think."

"I'm so hungry," Geoff said.

"I know. I am too. We have to get some money," Ash said.

"We could try using Mom's cash station codec," Geoff suggested.

"This is an emergency."

"This is definitely an emergency, but if we use it, we'll have a whole new one."

"We should go to a transit port," Geoff said.

"What?"

"One time, on Simon Timex, they had to get cash and didn't want to be followed, so they waited till five minutes before a shuttle for Vegas and then used the cash station."

"We're not going to Vegas."

"Neither did he," Geoff explained.

"Ha." Ashley laughed.

"He didn't even take a shuttle. He just went there and the bad guys spent twenty minutes trying to figure out where he went. They split up, and he was already gone."

"We're not going to a transit hub, Geoff. Maybe that works on TV, but they're full of cops. I really don't think it's a good idea."

"No, not to hide out, just to use a cash station. That way, if they do pick up on us, they'll have to scan all the carriers to see if we even got on a shuttle. Otherwise, if we just go to some regular old bank, they're going to be all over us."

"Okay, okay. We'll try it. But the first sign of anything and we're out."

"The first sign of anything and it'll be too late," Geoff answered.

Ashley smiled. "As long as we're clear."

Geoff smiled back.

\*\*\*

Forty minutes later, the siblings had parked, staked out and approached a cash station set next to a transit hub. People crowded the terminal. Each shuttle discharged a multitude of passengers and then sucked up the new fares, leaving the platform nearly empty. Ash and Geoff had spent fifteen minutes watching the terminal from different locations, slowly circling the crowded platform. There were a dozen automated ticket stations, each doubling as a cash station. The particular platform also happened to be empty of uniformed policemen.

Geoff and Ashley both noticed other orphan children who had begun stalking them, but considering their recent experiences, they weren't worried. Yet once they stepped onto the platform, a tall, lanky boy confronted the pair.

"This is the Devils' station. You want to use it, you have to pay the Devils' tax."

The Angel City Devils were a notorious street gang. Everyone had heard of them, many who had no affiliation whatsoever claimed to be members. Ashley strongly suspected the boy in front of her was of the later group. All true members of the Angel City Devils bear the Devil's mark. At first glance, she didn't see his mark.

Ashley stepped directly toward him. "Unless you want to bleed red blood, you'd better step back."

Geoff noticed that Ashley's right hand was held behind her back, as if keeping Geoff away from the bully, but then he saw the black rectangle.

The tall boy laughed. His hair stuck up at odd angles, and he looked as if he hadn't had a shower or a picked up a brush in years. "You don't understand. We have to collect the tax. You don't pay us, we get beat."

Ironically, despite his unclean appearance in all other respects, the boy's teeth glowed a brilliant white. They were clean and straight and perfectly out of place in his filthy mouth.

"We're not paying, so get lost," Ashley said.

She moved back half a step; just enough to appear scared and push Geoff back a couple more.

"Oh, you're paying all right. You're paying." He mistook Ashley's retreat for cowardice and stepped toward her, raising his hand to strike.

There were four other boys and Ash noticed that the others didn't seem into it. They were all leaning back, turning away; hardly even watching. Ash was familiar with dangerous groups of bullies, and these guys weren't participating. There were also several adults standing nearby, ignoring the incident entirely.

The boy with the pure white teeth swung at Ashley. He caught her

right across the face. The CRACK, the volume of the slap, brought the entire room to a complete and sudden pause. No one said anything, everyone looked over to Ashley and her aggressor.

Lots of the adults were now watching. Ashley recognized the same older Chinese man across the hall. He was the same man she'd seen in the park and the library.

Dirty face giggled uncontrollably. "Five across the eyes bitch!"

Ashley had allowed herself to be distracted. She stood quietly, her face burned, the skin raised where his hand had made such abrupt trespass. She felt violated. She felt helpless. She felt fury, and then she moved.

Stepping forward with a powerful front kick, she caught him square in the groin. His sudden intake of air and silent, pained look confirmed her accurate impact with the desired target.

Ashley stepped back, letting him collapse to his knees. She tried to resist the urge, but couldn't, and delivered several savage strikes to the boy's exposed face. She brought her fist directly down into his nose and mouth as blood exploded from beneath her hand.

After the flurry of punches, the boy collapsed to the station floor. His hands clutched at both his crotch and face. Between the fingers, under the red ripped flesh, two rows of perfectly white teeth. Ashley hoped she'd chipped at least one but refrained from kicking him in the head.

Most people were still watching the confrontation, except for the Chinese man, who appeared to be studying the schedule board.

Ashley scanned the faces of the boy's friends. None of them seemed interested in taking revenge against her, their eyes all found other things to look at. The adults, who hadn't done anything when the boy hit Ash, likewise didn't do anything now. They turned back to their original conversations, and the busy air of the station picked up once again.

The boy had gotten into a sitting position, his right hand investigating the damage to his nose.

Ashley saw a nearby cash station and led Geoffrey over to it. She punched in her parent's code and took out five hundred republican talents. No one noticed. No one came rushing over to arrest them. No one cared.

Ashley looked for the white haired Chinese man again, but he wasn't in the terminal anymore.

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An hour later Ashley and Geoff wheeled a cart through a grocery store. Ash had gotten a backpack from the 'Back to School' aisle and it sat in

the center of the cart as they filled it with fruit, nuts, and premixed combinations of trail-mix. Geoff was frustrated because Ashley kept nixing his requests for candy, soda or chips.

Geoff wanted to get two backpacks full of stuff. Ash had objected to that as well, so the single backpack remained open in the center of the cart, gradually being filled with what Geoff referred to as birdseed and other slowly rotting biomass.

"Sugar's not good for you," Geoff mocked. "Soda's too heavy to carry. Chips take up too much space. No matter what I want, you're going to say No," he complained.

Ashley almost blurted out, *'No, I won't'* but realized that would only prove his point. "I'll make you deal," Ash offered. "How about instead of coke, we get juice."

"Whatever, Mom."

"We need to think long term. After this, we are done. Total underground, understand?"

"What do you mean?" Geoff asked.

"After this we are not showing our faces in Angel City again. No more shopping. We get the evidence and we leave. Deal?"

"Well, when the new comics come out, we could just wear masks."

"Ha! No." Ashley rolled her eyes, and the cart, deeper into the store.

\*\*\*

Later that afternoon, the siblings were sprawled out under a tree in a park, the second car parked nearby. They each had backpacks, sleeping bags and a couple changes of clothes. They sat encircled by junk food litter of all kinds; chips, soda bottles, candy wrappers, comic books and horror magazines. Geoff was having the time of his life. Ashley had clearly broken under the pressure of her younger brother's persistent requests and assaults.

Ash thumbed through the stack of comics, looking for anything that might capture her interest. Geoff grabbed one from the bottom of the stack and handed it to her. It was a western - cowboys versus ninjas. Ashley was quite sure that ninjas weren't an indigenous feature of the Wild West. That was the last thing she remembered thinking before she fell asleep, under the low-hanging tree. Geoff remained beside her, consuming sugar and pulp.

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## Chapter 25 - Surrounded and Separated

**Monday, August 5th, 2313**

A couple of days later, Ashley and Geoff drifted through the local mall. Whenever Geoff asked why they weren't on their way to Canada, Ash replied that she wanted to wait until it was safer to travel. In truth, she wanted to find out just who Stanwood and Von Kalt were, but she didn't dare tell Geoffrey, for fear that he'd go looking in cyberspace and run into the Eel or other equally sinister fellow, someone capable of causing him serious harm.

They checked out stores, played sample video games and tried out furniture. Ashley noticed several different sets of people in the mall around them. She knew that any of them could be there to abduct her and Geoff. At any given moment, someone might approach them, produce a weapon and bark clipped commands, as the agents in the library had.

Ash realized she was increasingly reluctant to search for Stanwood or his deputy online; it was her search for her father that had brought the other agents to the library. This time there probably wouldn't be another Major Ross to rescue them.

Despite Ross's conversations with his colleague Reid, Ash had little doubt that they'd run out of all the elaborate rescues available to them. From here on out, they had to be more careful. They couldn't be making stupid mistakes. She knew that all the guns and research in the world wouldn't get her any closer to what she wanted. She needed evidence, solid, concrete, undeniable evidence. If it existed, there was only one place she was going to find it.

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Tired of the cramped sleeping conditions inside the car, Ash convinced Geoff that they should go camping. Being the middle of summer, there were dozens campsites throughout the city. They registered a space over the car's online connection and landed a short time later. They laid out their sleeping bags, and watched the stars as thin pale clouds rippled through the sky overhead. Before the moon was halfway up, the pair were breathing deeply and drowsy.

"Geoff," Ash said.

"Yeah."  
"We have to go home," Ash said.  
"We can't go home again, Ashley. They'll catch us if we do."  
"It's the only way."  
"What about Canada? We could almost be there by now."  
Ashley didn't answer. Brother and sister fell asleep together beneath a carpet of stars.

### **Thursday, August 8th, 2313**

At dawn, Ashley awoke under the bright, morning sky.  
Geoff woke up a short time later. "I'm hungry. Let's get breakfast."  
"Look, you agreed. We're not going back into town."  
"We are in town. We're just not out in public."  
Ashley said nothing.  
"Come on, really? You want to stay out here?"  
"You agreed," Ashley said.  
"Yeah, but seriously, forever?" Geoff argued.  
"For right now. Hiding is all we'd be doing in Canada. Why not here?"  
"But to never go into town? I'm almost out of comics," Geoff said.  
"So read them twice."  
"You don't really want raisins and nuts for breakfast, do you?" Geoff asked.  
"Geoff. If we don't leave, they will catch us," Ashley said.  
"Then let's leave! At least if we're camping in Canada we can go into town for comics, right?" he asked.  
"We will go to Canada, but we have to get the evidence first. So, for now, we camp out until it's safe to go get it. We're not that far from home. All we have to do is get the security footage, and we'll go. Okay?"  
"Today?" Geoff asked.  
"Yes, today. Tonight. We'll go at night."  
"I don't really care if we go to Canada or not. I just want to stay together. We'll be safe; Dad said so. He said, whatever happens, just stay with Ashley and you'll be safe."  
Ashley didn't say anything.  
"I have to go to the bathroom," Geoff said.  
Ash gestured for him to walk well away from their camp.  
"It's too cold," Geoff said. "And I gotta go number two."

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Ash and Geoff walked toward the restrooms a few campsites away. Behind them, a group of uniformed boys in their late teens patrolled the park. A few were walking and a few more sat on the companion golf cart, floating along the path. They grinned at Ash. She didn't like it. Despite their slow pace and non-threatening behavior, they were following them, and they looked malicious, openly dangerous.

"Can we go out for breakfast, please," Geoff asked, as they approached the toilets.

"You know what? Sure, no problem," Ashley answered. "Just hurry up."

Geoff smiled and disappeared behind the door with the male symbol.

Without looking at them, Ashley kept a close eye on the trailing young safety officers. They slowed, and the driver of the cart stopped their advance. The three uniforms continued their walk, directly toward Ash. One of the cart's riders climbed off to tie his shoe.

The three approaching boys continued their leisurely pace as they approached and drifted past, ignoring Ashley.

"After this were going into the mountains, I mean it," Ashley said.

"Okay, I hear you," Geoff answered from inside.

Ash watched the walking boys continue, but they moved with exaggerated slowness as they reached the bend up ahead. It was as if they didn't want to lose sight of her. The boys on the cart were talking, not paying any attention to her, but not leaving either.

Ashley waited for Geoff. She'd heard the toilet flush, but that was at least a couple of minutes ago. It was too long ago.

Ash turned around and looked at the structure. The bathrooms were attached to a much larger building, a Parks' Services building. The back half of the structure was arched and curved downward into the hovering facility. Ashley immediately recognized it as a tunnel, leading to the trains running through the city.

"Geoff?" she said.

"In here," he answered.

Confused by the waiting game of the older teens, Ashley went into the boy's bathroom.

In addition to the sinks, stall and urinals, there was a half-open door to the structure beyond. The massive garage was filled with landscaping equipment, two more golf carts, as well as a locker area and a couple of desks.



Geoff waved to her from the back of the hall. He stood beside an open panel in the huge hatch, sealing the maglev tube. Although there were no train cars present, it was obvious enough that the garage had been built to repair the hover trains that ferried people throughout Angel City.

"Come on," he yelled, ducking back behind the panel. "Whooooo!" Geoff's voice slid away from her far quicker than his ability to run.

Ash sprinted across the hall, jumping down into the tunnel after her brother. Like Geoff, she slid with one leg stretched out and the other curled beneath her, flying down the terillium-laced tube. When Ashley reached the place where the pipe flattened out again, she found herself effortlessly standing. Geoff was ahead of her, making his way past a couple of gates leading into a hub of maintenance corridors. Ashley followed silently.

"Ha!" A barred gate slammed shut behind Geoff. "We got another one!" a young truant officer shouted.

A group of boys materialized from deeper in the tunnels. "Hey, there sewer rat. Looks like we got us one more for the stew!"

Geoff spun. Older boys, their uniforms identifying them as members of the civil services, had surrounded him. Several of them held long electric prongs. Geoff saw handcuffs in several hands, as well.

"Our job is locking up stray dogs, and you are about as homeless as I've ever seen," one boy taunted.

Another leapt and pinned Geoff's arms behind his back. "No orphans in our tunnels." He handcuffed the struggling Geoff.

Ashley charged the gates, kicking at the iron cross bars. "Let him go!!!"

"Oh, hey, we got us another one! Someone trip the lock." The boy jabbed his electric staff through the bars, nearly grazing Ash.

Ashley grabbed the staff, jerking it away from him.

The boy reached through the grate and grabbed Ashley by her shirt. She grabbed the offending hand and twisted it back on itself, using the bars of the grate as leverage. He fought her, but she had an unbeatable position, he was already over extended. Ashley heard the ligaments of his shoulder begin to rip and tear. The older boy screamed.

"Let him go!" Ashley yelled.

In the distance, the other dogcatchers looked up from their fight with the struggling Geoff.

Ashley twisted the boy's wrist, he howled in agony. She released the tension just enough for him to breathe. "I said LET HIM GO!"

One of the boys stepped forward to say something.

Ashley gave her captive's wrist a quarter turn and his screams drown out the words of his comrade. Ashley released the tension and let the pain subside. He became quiet again.

In the silence, Ashley spoke, "Let him go or I will cut his arm off."

For emphasis, she held up the prototype and pressed the button. Six inches of razor-sharp steel jumped into her hand.

Geoff struggled with his captors.

The forward soldier spoke, "We... We uh... We don't have a key for that gate. We couldn't even take you with us if we wanted to."

Ashley wrenched the boy's shoulder from its socket; the screaming and ripping sounds magnified by the tunnel walls. A moment later and he passed out from the pain.

Geoffrey got loose and ran. Acting on instinct, one of the kids pulled his stun gun and fired. Geoffrey fell, out cold. The teens rushed over to him and checked his vitals. Still breathing, his heart still beating, they carried him to the back of their segmented cart.

In the distance, three men appeared, men in suits, carrying guns.

Ashley turned from the gate and left her prisoner hanging, unconscious and broken.

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## Chapter 26 - Deeper and Deeper Still

Ash didn't want to try going back for the car. The teens at the top of the tunnel had been too interested in her and Geoff. She suspected the lot of them had been working together and turned down one of the branching tunnels.

At first she just walked, directly into the inky black. There was nothing to see, even if she could see. The trains no longer ran through these tunnels, the lines had been cancelled long ago.

At one time, this had been a commercial hub; busy enough to warrant several local lines. Its cavernous malls had been gutted for distribution chains where faceless packages were sorted between more upscale and current destinations.

Drifters, parolees, laborers, all drawn to the low-stress employment offered by the shipping outfits made up the clientele of the local shops, restaurants and the scattered urban living structures. Wandering through the tunnel, Ashley doubted she'd find much assistance, wherever it led. She slowly became able to make out the tunnel wall; there was light coming in from somewhere.

Suddenly the earth around the girl began to shake and rumble. A train roared as it passed by, unseen, beyond the walls of her dark enclosure. Shocked from her complacency, Ashley ran down the tunnel, sprinting toward whatever it was that lie ahead of her. Ashley ran until her thighs burned and her feet ached, until her lungs stretched to their limit.

Ashley had almost reached the light source. As she approached it, Ashley noticed the light source was wavering, wobbling. That was when she heard the voices. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but these voices were adult.

There was an intersection in the tunnel, the light coming from around a corner. Ash crept closer to the edge. Peeking around, Ashley saw figures in the distance. Several adults held flashlights, grilling a group of juveniles - the dogcatchers. Ashley saw one of their vehicles in the background; it was empty. It took her a couple of minutes, but Ashley was able to work her way closer to the heated conversation.

These were some of the same kids she'd tangled with an hour earlier. She recognized them.

She got close enough to make out some of their words, only every other sentence, when only one person happened to be speaking at a time.

"Well we haven't seen her!"

"Then where is she?"

"She has to come this way."

"Fuck you!"

"We're just doing our job!"

"And the other one?"

"They took a full load back to the center."

"He's in custody."

"We should split up."

Ashley didn't wait for the flashlights to turn in her direction. She retraced her steps back down the darkened tunnel. She continued on, into the darkness, jogging smoothly, trying hard not to panic.

The lights were behind her now; she was cornered. Then she reached the cave in. The tunnel that snaked its way through the superstructure had cracked open, spilling filler earth into one side of the tunnel and exposing a wicked gash in the other, directly into the man-made facility.

Ashley knew it wouldn't take her pursuers long to reach her. She was cornered, trapped, unless she crawled into the fissure. She saw the flashlights then heard the staccato stomps of their footfalls. Ash didn't wait to make out their voices. The dirt that filled in the gaps of the structure had hardened a bit, upon exposure to the air. She pushed herself into it.

Ashley tried to grip the wall of the superstructure but immediately began to slide downward, deeper into the crevice. She wondered how such a thing could happen to such a large facility. The section was almost large enough to be a city by itself.

She could see the crack. She wasn't too deep, yet. She pushed deeper and screamed as the dirt beneath her feet gave out. Ashley slid through the earth, riding the soft edge of the broken section. She dodged struts rushing toward her from odd angles, threatening to take an eye or rip an internal organ into the external world. The ride seemed to have no end. She was terrified that the crack would vent her into the open sky, ten thousand feet above the earth, far from any potential safety nets.

Finally, the sliding earth spilled Ashley into a vaulted room, onto the top of a ten-foot mountain of dirt. Ash tumbled down the mound into the

midst of a construction crew, engaged in repairing the rip. A cloud of dust and debris billowed from the girl as she stood and brushed herself off.

Aside from a few scratches, Ash seemed okay. As soon as she was assured of this fact, she bolted from the vault, the workers calling after her.

Sprinting down the new, well-lit tunnel, sprinting for her life, Ashley outdistanced them immediately. She ran into the curve, all the tunnels seemed curved, and Ashley ran right into the heart of it.

Suddenly, as if she'd been splashed with cold water, Ashley realized why her pursuers gave up so quickly. Then she heard it, the rumble.

Ashley increased her speed. It was her only option. Overhead, the magnetic cable was mounted to the ceiling. When the train came, there would be no room for her small body, but Ashley continued running. She managed her breathing and launched ahead with a speed she didn't even know she was capable of. Ashley gave it everything she had.

There, up ahead, was the platform. Just as Ashley's eyes and brain recognized the promise of safety, her mind also recognized the increased illumination coming from behind her. Then, suddenly, as the train rounded the corner behind her, she sprouted a shadow.

The train operator jerked the horn in reflex, telling Ashley something she already knew, but waking up the sleepy passengers waiting on the platform. Everyone leaned out to watch the approaching train. They pointed and watched the sprinting girl, who was sure to be crushed.

Ash redoubled her efforts. Ahead, to the left, she spotted the small offshoot, a walkway and stairwell. There was a short gate at the top of the stairwell. She pushed hard at the ground. The train screamed again, desperate not to run her over.

Ash made the walkway just one step before the train would have killed her. The wind in its passing carried her up the stairs. Ashley's foot found the top of the gate two steps earlier than she'd anticipated.

Now she was hurtling into the crowded platform, trying to keep her balance and control the accelerated momentum. She stepped out, planting her right foot on the window of a passenger car, as the train slowed for its scheduled stop. The step was all she needed. It was enough.

Ashley landed, sliding across the tiled floor, the waiting passengers making space for her.

They applauded her, as she and the train both came to a complete stop. The engineer dashed out, he ran up and hugged the filthy girl. Ashley smiled, was polite, even posed for a few photos pointing to her footprint, impossibly high on the train's glass window-sidewall.

Then the appearance of a uniformed janitor snapped the young girl back to reality. She quickly said her goodbyes, leaving the platform for a nearby restroom. Ash had no change of clothes and no way to disguise herself. She simply washed her face and arms, and dried them as best she could.

After encountering the mercenaries, Ashley was glad that Geoff had been taken by innocent truant officers. The young officers, only eighteen or nineteen, were simply doing their two years of public service. From the conversation she overheard, it was clear that they weren't working with the Federal Agents pursuing her.

If Geoff was with other kids, he was probably safe. Even though she knew that couldn't possibly last terribly long. *If she didn't do something smart, something different and mighty soon, they would find him. And if she didn't do something right now, they were going to find her.*

Ash spotted the nearby shopping center and headed for it. She watched the people she passed without looking at them. None of them were watching her, which was a good thing, from every possible angle.

A small park ran alongside the shopping center. Ash was hungry, but didn't want to go into any of the stores. She headed toward the park. That was when she spotted him.

The Chinese man was sitting on a bench. He wasn't looking at her initially, but turned to meet her gaze. He patted the bench next to her, gesturing for her to take a seat. She did.

"Ashley. I knew your father," he said. "My name is Dr. Lao Te. It's been a long time since I've seen you."

"Not that long," Ashley replied. "I saw you in the park the other day, and at the library. I even saw you in the transit terminal."

"Yes. You really took apart that boy who slapped you. Don't you think you may have over done it a bit?"

"I didn't kick him. He deserved what he got."

"Did he? Very much your father's daughter," Lao smiled.

"How did you know him?"

"We worked together, when we were younger."

Ash said nothing. Dr. Te spoke crystal clear English; only the pacing of his words was unique. He took his time with each thought, as if fixing it in his mind before actually vocalizing it.

Looking at Dr. Te, Ashley realized he must be older than seventy, maybe over eighty. His skin looked thin and brittle. Every hair on his head

was white, even his eyebrows were without pigment. His eyes were bright and clear, almost luminescent. His clothes were obviously from China, or at least Chinatown; an authentic silk shirt, canvas pants and thin cloth shoes.

"How much do you know about your father's work?" he asked.

"I know this is important," Ashley showed him the prototype. "I think it's what they want."

"Indeed."

"Geoff says it can think."

"Your father wasn't so sure."

"Geoff's not guessing. He said there are two of them. He says there's another one, that someone has it and that they're looking for us."

"And so, what will you do?"

"Well this, it was my dad's, and now it's mine. No one is ever taking it from me."

Lao sat quietly.

"How do I know you really worked with my dad?" Ashley asked.

Lao smiled at the sky.

"It's just that I don't know you," Ashley explained.

"True. You have no reason to trust me."

Together they sat quietly for a moment.

"You aren't trying to kill me," Ash observed.

Lao smiled, "That would be quite problematic for us both."

"What do you mean?" Ashley asked.

Lao composed his thoughts. "It seems anyone who has tried to kill you, has so far been unsuccessful."

Ashley looked down.

Together they watched pedestrians and shoppers drift past the small park.

After a long moment of silence, Lao asked, "What will you do next?"

"I don't know. They caught Geoff. They killed my parents, right out in front of our house, for the whole world to see. My dad sent us out into the forest. He told us to go to Mexico."

"They say David was about your age, when he fought Goliath. Youth is no reason to give up on the path to enlightenment."

"The path to what?"

"The path is the reason you get out of bed in the morning. If you were not on the path to enlightenment, you would be dead."

"So then, what happens when you find enlightenment? You die?"

"Some people die. Some people just start over, but the second time,

it's easier."

"Did you find your enlightenment?" she asked.

Lao smiled at her. "I think I did."

"So then, what do you think I should do?" Ashley asked.

"They say, if you drop your car keys in the garage, do not look for them under the streetlamp, just because the light is better."

Ashley stared at the cobblestones under her feet. The rocks resembled the stones used for their backyard patio, only glossier. Here, they had been polished and washed regularly. The absurdity of the entire structure made her laugh. Here they were, sitting in a fake park on a fake street, on a manufactured anti-gravity hub, floating ten thousand feet above the ground.

At home, Ashley had always been impressed with the way the forest asserted itself. The way Mother Nature threatened to cover the patio with moss growing along the mortar grooves. The way the forest climbed over the grass, and the grass crowded the stones. Here, there was none of that.

The earth had been tamed. Man had moved off her surface, to pollute the skyline with his floating cities and flying vehicles. Ashley was struck with the idea that mankind had gone from being a maggot on in the earth's skin, to a swarm of flies above its surface.

Feeling generally awful, Ashley realized she'd love to see it all burn. Except for the fact that Geoffrey was out there, somewhere. Even if she could destroy the whole world, she wouldn't, not today. She had to find her brother.

"I have to get Geoffrey back," She said. "Ross gave us travel visas."

"Ross, Kelly Ross? He's here?"

"He was. They killed him." Ash was quiet for a moment. She laughed quietly, "His name was Kelly?"

Lao looked at her. "You cannot get your brother back without exposing those who have taken your parents."

"Expose them to who? They run the whole world."

"Anyone with power has enemies."

"Is that why you're here?"

"No, I can't really help you. I can only get us both killed. Sitting here with you like this... is the extent of my power here."

"So what, get proof and go to the police?"

"That's what I would do."

"I'm just a kid. This is crazy."

"Your father was a cautious man. If there is any proof to be had, it's going to be at your home. They must have left something."



"Yeah, a dozen agents, staking out the house."

"How do you know?"

"Ross thought there might be some security footage, but he said it was surrounded. They're just sitting there, waiting for us to show up."

"Hmm."

"I told him that we should kidnap one of them and interrogate him, but he wouldn't listen to me."

"Probably very wise. A tortured man can give you nothing but his pain."

"I'll take it," Ash said.

"It would be best for you to remain cautious. You still have much to lose. Your thirst for revenge might be great, but it might also prove expensive."

"I'm sick of running and hiding. I'm not doing that anymore. I can't just give up. If they left something, I will find it."

"People always leave something. It's in their nature."

Ashley laughed. "You're not really here are you?" She looked at the rectangle. "You're in my head."

"Yes and no," he answered.

With her left hand, Ashley reached out and passed her fingers through the edge of the illusion.

"I'm in Jerusalem," Lao answered.

"You're talking to me over this thing?" Ashley nodded to the prototype.

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"All I can think of is to go home?"

"Seems you've tried everything else."

Ashley laughed. "Seems?" she asked with a smile, squinting into the afternoon sunlight.

Lao only smiled in reply.

Ashley and Lao ate lunch together; rather, Ashley ate and Dr. Te told her stories about her parents. He'd known her mom since childhood and it was he who had first introduced them. Ashley's father had been infatuated with Ana from the moment they met.

A few times Ashley thought she was going to burst into tears at the stories Lao was telling her.

As she finished her meal, Lao explained that he had to go offline and that she would be on her own for at least the next twenty-four hours. At his

advanced age, his health required long periods of rest. He wished her luck and asked her to be careful. Taking his leave, he simply rose and walked through a nearby wall.

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## Chapter 27 - Sky Riding

A short time later, feeling good after the proper meal, Ashley moved stealthily through the sporting goods store. She didn't think anyone was looking for her. She simply reasoned that it would be profitable to avoid others generally, so that when the time came, she wouldn't be out of practice.

She found the most expensive hoverboard in the shop and a top-shelf whip-sail. She picked out a new set of clothes, changed in the dressing room and carried the items and tags to the automated check out. When asked for payment, she entered the family code into the terminal. Alarms didn't go off, the terminal didn't hiss, smoke, or burst into flames. It processed her purchase and asked her to have a lovely day.

Outside, Ashley ripped open the kite. It was tricky, but she assembled the sail and attached it to the board's central grommet. Standing the board up was more difficult still. The sail restricted her to just a couple directions, forcing her to acknowledge the breeze and respond to it. She practiced in a small abandoned parking lot near the shopping center. She had two walls to bank off of, and if she wanted to get creative, there was a parking garage across the central walkway.

It was the railing she was preparing for. From this level, there were probably eight railings she'd need to clear before it would be just her, the board and the horizon. Ash wasn't sure she was up to it just yet. The way she'd done so far, she was more likely to fall off the kite than ride it.

She'd been at it for almost twenty minutes when the federal agents showed up, putting an end to her practice. They waited until she had a particularly ugly spill. She saw them coming, four men in two teams, from both directions. She picked herself up and dusted the dirt from her new jeans and sweatshirt.

They stood all around her now. Two of them, the junior two, had their hands on their weapons.

"Is there some kind of problem?" Ash asked. The idea of picking up the kite and running for the rail had occurred to her.

It seemed to have occurred to them too; they had positioned themselves to block her in every direction. They would catch her, and they knew it.

"We need you to come with us." The closest one spoke. Ash suspected the role was interchangeable.

"I need your gun," she said.

The agents looked at each other, confused.

Ash stepped forward, her hand snaking into the man's jacket. She spun, coming away with his weapon and ending up behind him.

The other suits drew but hesitated, as the guy in front blocked Ashley. From behind him, she opened fire, killing two and wounding the third.

The disarmed leader elbowed her in the head, knocking her to the ground. Ashley fired twice, once as she went down and again with her rough landing, killing the lead man.

The wounded agent fired at her. Three rounds zipped by as Ash ducked behind a park bench and trashcan. He'd missed.

She slipped behind a utility box. Consumed with his injury, the agent didn't see her. She slipped further away, flanking him. Finally, she approached from behind.

The man struggled into a crouch. Ash stayed in his blind spot.

He stood slowly, took a difficult breath and coughed. She reached forward and closed her freehand over the pistol in his right. Her other hand smashed her heavy gun into the side of his head. He collapsed unconscious.

Ash tucked the hostage weapon into her belt and dragged the kite away from the bodies.

She took a deep breath and exhaled. Holding the mast as a soldier with his rifle, she ran straight for the ledge. She stair-stepped a bench and then the rail; keeping the kite horizontal, as though it were a giant wing, she leapt into the sky.

The next floor was coming up fast, Ashley dropped the board, the mast and sail pivoted, the board swinging under her feet. She came down, accelerating toward the next rail and over. With the next level, she fell less, the sail took up more of the weight, and suddenly she was airborne.

Level by level, she gained altitude, until it was clear she was no longer over the shopping center at all. And like some cartoon character who has suddenly realized he's going to fall, gravity stretched its hand out to her and the board began to lose altitude.

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Deputy Director Von Kalt stood on the patio, several hundred yards behind her, and watched the girl sail out into the empty sky. He held the Metachron in his hand. Three of his agents were dead. Emergency medical technicians were tending to the wounded man. Several agents stood on the balcony, watching her escape and coordinating with pursuit squads.

Her brother was caught; he was in the system. Von Kalt didn't have him yet, but that was just a formality. If she hadn't run for an international border yet, she certainly wasn't going to now. All Von Kalt had to do was find the boy, and she would come to him.

He had felt her presence. Or rather, the Metachron had sensed the Micronix. It was getting more and more difficult for him to tell the difference between the pocket computer's suggestions and his own desires.

The director dropped the device into his pocket and rubbed his eyes. Even without directly holding it, the mental projections of the device were still present. Von Kalt was wired into the camera systems of three satellites, his approaching tactical vehicles, and several other reconnaissance teams.

Dr. Fox's magical little device had given him a hundred hands and a thousand eyes. He was damned if he wouldn't use every one of them.

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The wind whipped at her clothes, hair, and skin. The board bucked and snapped under her feet, strained by the opposing forces of gravity and her weight attached to the kite. The city seemed to hang in place around her, the bulk of Angel City's floating towers behind her and to the left; below, the hard structures of grounded Los Angeles. In the distance, she saw the ocean and the gently curving shoreline. Only the clouds appeared to be moving, or rather she through them.

It was beautiful. Ash felt as if she were a bird combined with a jet. She easily adapted to the ride, having the bowline and the mast to lean into, she piloted the kite across the sky at what felt like seventy or eighty miles an hour.

The clouds rushed around her; one moment she would be enveloped in white and then suddenly, the world would reappear. Finally, she was through the lowest ones and there was nothing between her and the sharp-pointed structures of steel and glass, rising from the hard surface of the city below.

Ashley banked as the buildings reached up for her, their giant metal teeth coming toward her. The kite snapped in the wind and Ashley held on as the kite, board and rider, spun toward the ground. She was going at least a

hundred now and accelerating. She held on.

The wind caught the kite and threw her toward a structure to her left. She lifted the board and slid along the side of the building. For a few brief moments, she was in control again. Then she cleared the building and was falling again – all noise and wind.

Ashley caught an updraft and rode it toward another skyscraper in her path. This time her approach was a bit smoother and the broad building provided a few brief moments of stability. She carved a path up the side of the scraper; briefly upsetting business meetings, before launching herself from the structure at a forty-five degree incline.

She found herself able to control the free-fall a little better, angling toward one building after another. She even landed on a few flat rooftops and skidded down other structure's sloped sides. She wasn't doing it just for fun, buzzing the metropolitan office buildings slowed her to fifty and sixty miles per, instead of free fall at over a hundred.

Ash made her way toward the curving arch of the Santa Monica Mountains. She came in from the north, sliding down over the structures of old Hollywood, keeping the Mulholland freeway cable to her right and gradually drifting down over the familiar residential neighborhoods and streets of a life gone by.

Ashley curved down toward the mountains, banking off the slower anti-gravity / magnetic-cable traffic. She slid down the side of a moving truck and then an idling flatbed, before sliding directly into a mountain wall. She caught the cliff side as easily as any of the twenty buildings she'd whipped past. The steep slope leveled out, and Ashley was able to catch her breath. She sailed down the ridgeline, moving over the mountaintops as if they were swells on an open stormy sea.

Cruising along the peaks, on relatively solid ground, Ash felt her heart, arms and shoulders relax. She realized she'd been clutching the kite with everything she had. Her hands had cramped into claws. It took repeated flexing to get them feeling normal again.

Ash sailed down the paths, coming closer to the neighborhood where she'd lived. She came in from the back, down the side of a steep mountain and then around the base on the low side, sailing into her neighborhood along the retaining walls and unprotected backyards of the families living against the mountain.

The knowledge flooded back, intoxicating her. Sailing down the familiar trails, Ashley hit turns at full speed, banking off trees into huge vertical jumps and landing in sweeping curves to dissipate the shock.

Ashley came toward the house from the mountainside and slid her board to a stop in the backyard. Skimming over the streets and rooftops, she hadn't spotted a single parked car with agents sitting in it. She hoped that, if they were out there, they hadn't spotted her either.

Ash pressed her hand against the panel and the backdoor opened. She hauled her kite into the house and closed the door. Inside, she looked around for any kind of security system. She looked for pinhole cameras or alarm boxes. Ashley checked the main doors, finding just the basic locks, no presence of any kind of security system at all.

In her father's study, everything appeared to be exactly as he'd left it. There was nothing about the house that looked as if it had been searched, ransacked or pilfered. Whatever the agents had wanted, it hadn't been among the family's material possessions.

Ashley's father owned a pair of Japanese samurai swords, standing on a rack in a glass case. Ashley stared at them from across the room, thinking about the reported incident with the blue goo, from his childhood.

Ash stared at the computer displays behind the desk. She walked over to stand before them. She reached out and waved her hand over the console, waking the display.

The display requested a password. "Zelena," Ash said, giving her mother's maiden name. Ashley had heard her father give the command many times.

"User recognized," the computer said. "Ashley Erin Fox, Welcome."

"I need security footage for this location, for Friday, July 26th, around three pm please?"

"Sorry, that footage is inaccessible from this location. This location has been compromised and all data stores have been scrubbed clean. This station must be reinitialized with a new user before any tasks or applications can be run."

Ashley sighed. She otherwise left the study exactly as she found it, not disturbing any more of its secrets or forcing its locks.

Not feeling especially hungry and already bored, Ash headed toward her own room. She moved slowly, just taking everything in. She peered through the windows at the front of the house. She saw no vehicles closing in, surrounding her. She saw no one at all.

Upstairs, she opened the door to her bedroom. It was just as she'd left it. No Goldilocks had been sleeping in her bed, filling the right half of the room. To the left, set at an angle, her desk was exactly as it had been.

Between the two, the open picture window displayed a magnificent view of the homes spotting the other side of the canyon.

Ashley took in the view. In the distance, the windows of the homes reflected the brilliant sunlight. Ashley looked at the center drawer of her desk. Of course, the prototype was in her pocket, but somehow the desk would always be it's home.

She checked her waistband. The agent's gun was gone. Somewhere during the ride she must have lost it. She hadn't felt it fall away, but she clearly didn't have it anymore.

Staring out across the canyon, she remembered the night of the fire, the night before she'd come into possession of the prototype. One of the homes across the canyon had been engulfed in flame. She looked for it, picked it out; it had been fully renovated, of course, but she was sure, that was it; that was the one.

Ash had gone into Geoff's room that night. She'd heard her father get sick in the nearby bathroom. Somehow that house was connected. Ashley stared at it. The all-glass wall and cascading balconies stared back at her.

Suddenly she understood; while there were no obvious cameras in her house, there might be other kinds of sensors. The cameras were all across the canyon, behind those glass walls. That was where she'd find the security footage she needed, she was sure of it. Maybe that terminal hadn't been scrubbed.

Not forgetting the need to be careful, Ashley left the house the same way she'd come in, through the back and into the forest.

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“Take us up above the halo,” Von Kalt ordered.

“Yes, Sir.” The pilot merged into the afternoon cable traffic. “Sir, the Director said we should...”

Von Kalt stared unemotionally into the pilot's eyes.

“Yes, Sir,” the pilot said, reconsidering his question.

The traffic above the central hub of the city was sparse, they could see in all directions. Von Kalt pulled up the teams' vehicle and helmet cameras. The Fox residence was quiet.

Von Kalt triggered his radio. “Status checks with a pause for course correction.” He pulled the Metachron device from his pocket.

“Foxtrot: We've got nothing at the residence.”

“We just reported an access at the residence!” Von Kalt interrupted. “Logs say it was the daughter. You missed her, or you've given yourselves



away. Remove to a circular patrol, five miles out. Do not screw this up!”

“Copy, Foxtrot Out.”

“Golf: holding position at the school.”

“Very Good, Continue.”

“Hotel: We’re on the labs, all quiet here. “

Von Kalt’s phone rang. “Yes, Director.”

“Yes, sir. We caught up with her at the mall. She killed three men.

“No, I didn’t see her, she escaped.

“Yes, that’s exactly what she did. She jumped off the building. I already forwarded the footage.

“Of course, I’ll keep you informed.” Von Kalt hung up and tossed his phone out the window.

With the Metachron in hand, he dove into the digital maze that was the Child Services Department. *All he had to do was find the brother, and she would come to him. He will rewrite the other, the adversary, and the enemy. He will rewrite it, and he will kill her if he has to. She will give it to him, or she will die.*

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## Chapter 28 - Martin Dunkirk

Ashley flew down the paths, making her way toward the far side of the neighborhood. In her excitement, she overshot the street leading to the security house and drifted too far down into the canyon. She needed to go uphill.

The kite wasn't helping anymore. The fall had drained the charge and she wasn't able to push it up the steep canyon walls. It was perfect for riding downhill, but that wasn't helping now.

Ash knelt and disconnected the kite from the board. She collapsed the whip and folded up the sail. The kite had saved her life, but it was worthless now.

Ash wrapped the sail around the mast and tied it with a bit of guideline. She buried the whole mess in some brush at the base of a big tree. Returning to her board, in the middle of the path, Ashley had the intense feeling of being watched. She knelt to tie her shoe, scanning the trees and paths around her. She saw no one, and her shoe actually did need to be tied.

When Ashley looked up, she saw Oscar, the Dunkirk's cat. *What was he doing out here?*

Ashley turned to grab her board and found Bobby Dunkirk, standing just down the path. She couldn't understand how he'd gotten behind her, but there he was, dressed in all white, and he was staring at her. Oscar had come with him.

Ash noted how much Bobby had changed since she'd last seen him, weeks ago. His hair was slicked down close to the scalp, and his clothes were perfectly white, clean and pressed. He looked as if he were ready for picture day at school. Bobby's expression was also quite formal, no smile, his hands folded behind his back. This was not the same boy she had known. This Bobby was remarkably different. He seemed more adult than most adults did.

"What happened to Jack?" Bobby asked, without any sort of greeting.

"He died," Ash answered.

"It was the very next day, wasn't it?" There was something eerie about Bobby, from his dead white suit to his ultra-smooth demeanor. He didn't seem

drugged. In fact, he seemed unusually wide-awake.

Ash also found herself to be strangely calm. "Yes, it was the next day."

"Do you miss him?" Bobby asked.

"Very much," she answered.

"I need your help," Bobby said, without a pause.

"My help?"

"You were there that day, in the canyon. That's when it all started. It touched you, I can tell. You're the only one who can help me."

"What are you talking about?" Ashley asked. She knew he was talking about the Micronix, the prototype in her pocket. The same way she'd known her father was involved when Jack died.

Oscar seemed oblivious to all of it. He sniffed the grass and weeds, watching everything and nothing.

"He's after me. He killed them and now he's after me." Bobby looked up the hill toward their street. He sounded a little more normal, but the words he was saying were disturbing.

"Who's after you?" Ash asked.

"My dad, he killed them. He's killed so many."

"Your dad?" Ashley asked, pulling out Ross's phone. "Do you want me to call the police?"

"No. They can't help me. He kills the police. That night you were running, he killed lots of them. You're the only one who can help me."

"I'm just a girl. What am I going to do against your dad?"

"You have the power. Only you can stop him. You have to stop him," Bobby was growing more impatient.

"You sound really crazy, you know that?"

"Please just come with me, I'm begging you." Bobby had gradually gone from weird monotone creep to panicked and terrified little boy.

Ash almost laughed but caught herself.

"Please, Ash," Bobby was almost in tears now. "He's going to kill my Mom! Please, you have to help me. He's gonna kill them all." Bobby paused and composed himself. "Please, just talk to him, Ash. He'll listen to you."

"Why do you think he'll listen to me?"

"I can feel it. You're different. When the man fell you found something. You found something, and it's in your pocket right now. That's why he'll listen. You have all the power. You can cure him."

Bobby seemed more normal now than Ash had seen him so far. He sounded perfectly okay. He was a little keyed up, but he wasn't doing his

weird zombie monotone and he wasn't panicking. "What do you mean cure him?"

"Like you cured me," Bobby said.

"When?" Ash asked.

"Just right now," Bobby answered.

Ashley looked at him; he certainly seemed less uptight.

"Everything will be all right, I'm sure of it. If you just come with me. Evan and Anne and my Mom will all be okay. If you talk to him, he won't hurt them."

Ash walked forward and put a hand on his shoulder. She looked Bobby in the eye. "It's going to be okay, I'll help you."

Bobby seemed to calm down considerably. "I have to show you, then you'll understand," Bobby said.

As Bobby walked through the forest, Ashley followed on her board. Her hand found the hard metal rectangle nestled in her pocket. Somehow she was not reassured by its flat texture under her fingertips.

Ashley stood with Bobby atop a small rise, past where the old asphalt street actually stopped. They stood, looking at the side of the modern-art fiasco Bobby called home. Ash could see her own house, just down the road.

Ash looked over at Bobby, he was terrified. She felt awful for having left him in the forest, that night a few weeks ago. It would be difficult to say that Bobby was okay; Ash didn't think he'd ever been normal, but he seemed better at the moment than when she had run into him ten minutes ago.

Bobby lived in one of the most expensive homes for miles. The white structure stretched out into the canyon, vast and angled. The rooms intersected in odd arrangements, walls and ceilings set together in disturbing ways, resulting in massive amounts of utterly wasted space. For a prosperous slumlord and art connoisseur, Ashley felt Mr. Dunkirk had exhibited zero taste in choosing the family domicile.

Ash hadn't seen Bobby's older brother, Evan, since the Pierce incident, and she rarely saw Anne outside of school. This summer, the Dunkirk's hadn't thrown any of their trademark summer parties. Mrs. Dunkirk loved to host giant parties, inviting hundreds of people. Shirley worked as a professional event coordinator, served as head of the PTA, and was a member of the neighborhood homeowners' association. She planned school field trips, coordinated weekend outings to amusement parks, and organized multiple-family gatherings at local restaurants.

The Dunkirk's also had a habit of slipping away for fancy trips. Upon

their return, the neighborhood kids would be tortured with story after story about how they went tiger hunting in India, or fishing for giant carp off the Sea of Japan. "And did you know that, in Japan, they have red dragonflies?" Bobby would go on and on, repeating the same trivial facts day-after-day.

Ash found their familial enthusiasm nauseating. Her family never took vacations. Ashley's father rarely took breaks of any kind from his work. As a result, Ashley hardly knew him, but as her mother put it, he made the sun shine and the grass grow. *"If your father stopped going to work, the world would fall apart."* Small comfort, even when the young girl believed it.

Now her world had come crashing down. Her parents no longer existed. She had lost her brother. This was a new world she was living in. Here, the rules were different.

Bobby reached into his back pocket, produced a key card and handed it to Ash.

"Is there a code," Ashley asked.

"No code, just swipe it. Go in through the back."

"Look Bobby, I'll go in there. I'll check on your family, but I want you to understand, it might already be too late. If your Mom is in there, if she's hurt, I'm calling the cops, okay. If anyone is hurt, it's nine-one-one, images attached."

"Please, just check, okay?"

Ashley rode her hoverboard right up to the back door and leaned it against the house. She used the key Bobby gave her and entered the kitchen.

Inside the house, everything was white. From the walls to the furniture, it was all white, off white or a tranquil blue-white. Only the floors were not white. The kitchen had been deep maroon stone. The hardwood floors of the living room and stairwell, an earthy variety of mountain lion tan, to a pale sandy grey. Ashley then began to notice the trim of the home. Crown moldings, runner boards, the railing on the stairwell, all bone-bleached and supremely smooth wood.

By the time Ashley had crossed the kitchen, she'd picked up an odd coppery smell. She breathed shallowly, looking for an abandoned sandwich or forgotten plate of food, anything that might contradict her overwhelming instinct.

A sound came from upstairs; movement.

Oscar meowed behind her. He'd slipped inside and was now contentedly cleaning a paw.

Another sound came from the second floor, heavy lifting.

Ash moved down the short hall from the immaculate kitchen and into the main foyer. She prepared to call out, but her voice caught in her throat. Bright crimson streaks stained the otherwise impeccably white walls.

Mrs. Dunkirk lay at the bottom of the stairwell, her head at the foot of the stairs, white-clothed body curving up over the wide circular staircase. If the fall to her present position didn't kill her, the deep stab wounds to her torso certainly did.

Ash heard Oscar drinking water behind her in the kitchen.

The bright crimson stains stood out sharp and crisp. Several hand prints and smears marked the railing and stairwell around Mrs. Dunkirk's body. Ash felt guilty for having disliked her so much. No one deserved to be butchered on the stairs like that.

Behind her, Oscar crunched his food into bits before swallowing.

Ash turned to her right and discovered Evan's decapitated corpse sprawled across the white downstairs couch. Neatly placed on the coffee table, his head sat in a pool of blood and plasma. It looked altogether different from Mrs. Dunkirk on the stairs.

The blood was not so widely scattered about. There were no bloody prints around the corpse. Evan's sprawled body was also dressed in white from head to foot. Ash suspected perhaps there had been some family photo scheduled, because this was not Evan's normal attire.

The killer had grabbed Evan by the hair as he sat on the couch and cut his head from his body. It had been done quickly and with a significant amount of surprise. Then, after decapitating his son, Mr. Dunkirk, (Ashley realized there was no reason to guess about it anymore); had chased his wife, Shirley, to the front foyer where he got a bit more aggressive.

Ashley snapped a couple pictures of Shirley, followed by a couple of Evan. She attached them, typed MURDER, 1826 CALISTAN WAY, and dialed 911.

Forgetting the phone, Ash found her eyes drawn to the top of the stairwell. Mr. Dunkirk stood, watching her, from the open two-story flight. The short, overweight, and usually harried businessman had gone triumphantly mad. Previous to this moment, Martin Dunkirk always appeared perfectly combed, coifed, and perfumed. He was usually attired in garments worth an affluent banker's salary.

Today he looked exactly as Ashley had always imagined him; drunk, unshaven, a rat's nest of greasy, tangled hair, dirty tank-top concealing his massive gut, wrinkled work pants held aloft by a single strained suspender. In his left hand, where Ashley might have pictured a newspaper or a doughnut,

Martin held a large, finely serrated kitchen knife.

The young girl and the homicidal murderer stared at each other.

Martin blinked first, and Ash sprinted for the kitchen door, pocketing the phone as she ran. Behind her, she heard the blood-crazed lunatic, thundering down the stairs. The pursuit went silent for a brief moment, as he leapt to clear his wife's corpse. Then he crashed on, chasing after her with a series of hard thuds.

Ashley crashed through the back door. Outside, she panicked and made her first mistake, forgetting her hoverboard, leaning against the house. She ran for the low, adobe wall where the property met the gently sloping canyon as Mr. Dunkirk barreled down the kitchen hall behind her. Bobby was nowhere to be seen.

Ash cleared the wall as Mr. Dunkirk burst through the kitchen door. Dunkirk pounded his way across the wooden deck and down the stairs. The heavy steps went quiet as he crossed into the foliage-carpeted dirt.

Ash recklessly sprinted down the paths, her feet hardly touching the ground. She morbidly joked with herself that if ballet didn't work out in the long term, she might follow in her mother's footsteps and enjoy a career running track. She didn't know she could move so fast; if she fell, the impact would fracture bones.

Well over three hundred pounds, wide-shouldered and thick-necked, she heard Marty Dunkirk hurl himself after her. She didn't risk looking back, but she could hear him gaining on her. The knife-wielding hand chopped and hacked at the opposing vegetation.

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## Chapter 29 - Metachron Closing

The leafy trees obscured the sky overhead as paths cut through the forest. On one turn in the trail, Ashley risked a glance over her shoulder. Mr. Dunkirk followed, closer than she'd imagined. She moved faster, but he kept coming.

Ashley turned to her right, heading slightly uphill, past the glen where Bobby liked to sit with his disciples. She slid down a sharp defile, the grass and weeds coming loose under her feet; luckily reaching the bottom without a twisted ankle.

To Ashley's left, where the defile became narrower and continued up the mountainside, there was an area that had recently been collapsed. From her place at the bottom of the stack, Ash could see the bodies, piled atop one another, surrounded by loose dirt. Dozens of bodies, stacked almost twenty feet high, the loose earth poured in between them, like mortar. The thick funk of decay and rot hung in the air.

Behind her Dunkirk roared with laughter as he clumsily made his way down the hillside. Ash turned to run, but vomited after the first step. She dragged on, limply stumbling and spitting out the remainder of her lunch, as she fled the lumbering psychopath.

She took another uphill path, dense with trees and underbrush. She didn't think, she just ran. The mistake hit her too late.

The path led to a narrow sliver of high ground, a peninsula with sheer-drop cliffs ahead and to both sides. Mr. Dunkirk howled with primal blood lust as he pursued her. To her back, and both sides, a few, sparsely covered feet of dirt was all that stood between Ash and a fall of forty meters or more. Back down the trail was the only safe way off the sliver of high ground.

The sweat soaked Mr. Dunkirk appeared at the mouth of the trail behind her and stalked forward.

Ashley backed out further onto the plateau.

Dunkirk paused in the shadow of the trees, just a few meters away. He



hesitated to reveal himself, as the precipice could be easily seen by any of several residences, as well as passing traffic. With a muttered curse, he stepped into the sunlight and raised the knife overhead.

Ash saw bits of green leaf streaked over dried blood. She backed away, moving further out onto the dangerous bit of mountain land.

Dunkirk surprised the young girl by leaping forward with a heavy knuckled backhand, knocking her from her feet.

Ash crouched where she had fallen, just a few inches from the edge. His rings had opened a wicked gash in her brow; blood ran into her eye. Her head rang like a tower bell.

"Sorry about your Mom," Dunkirk said.

Ashley didn't understand. She looked up at the towering figure but didn't reply.

"It was just a job, not like what you saw back there. Not like Shirley; that was spectacular."

Ash and Mr. Dunkirk stared at each other. He'd just admitted to killing her Mom! Ash was furious and near panicking. Her emotions were all over the place, but then something happened and she just shut off.

The words of Sihing Shou came back to her. It will be at that moment when you are weak, tired and probably very hurt, that is when you must act to save your life.

As Dunkirk stepped forward, she recognized his poor posture. He let his knees turn inward. They were weak, vulnerable.

Ashley struck. With her hands firmly planted in the dirt, she kicked at Dunkirk's left knee. The joint gave with a splintering crack. Martin crashed to the ground, screaming.

The knife lay between them.

Dunkirk clutched at his ruined leg, growling, howling and snapping at her. With a deep breath, he lurched up. Even on one knee, he towered over the small girl. He reached for the knife.

Ash moved, kicking again. Staying close to the earth, she unleashed a series of horizontal kicks to the large man's face, neck and chest. Eventually her persistence and coordination unbalanced him. She delivered the last three directly to his mouth and nose, literally stomping the deranged killer over the lip of solid ground and from her sight. She heard him scream until his voice grew obscured by cracking branches and then silenced by a muffled impact.

The knife remained where it had fallen.

Ashley stood. Above her, two police vehicles hovered, watching. Having just arrived, they were helpless to do anything but witness. She saw

the nearest officer grin and raise his fist in salute before they turned off to land in a nearby clearing. Ashley did not wave back or smile. She did not feel victorious or proud.

Ash noticed her breathing had leveled out, her heart, calm. Ashley felt powerful, capable, more than just confident. She felt superior.

Later, Ashley sat in the open back of an ambulance parked at the end of the street, out past the Dunkirk house. An EMT checked her vitals.

The tech smiled at her, "I'd say you look perfectly normal, considering the excitement. Any shortness of breath?"

Ashley shook her head.

The tech removed the sensors and opened a first aid kit. He gestured to her eyebrow and asked her to look to the right. The tech cleaned the wound and applied nanotape to help heal and regenerate the damaged tissue.

"You know, that was really brave," he said, looking her in the eye. "From what the detectives are saying, you saved a lot of people's lives today. You're a hero."

Ashley looked away and lowered her head. "I'm no hero. I was scared. I ran."

Ashley watched uniformed officers stretch yellow and black police tape across the Dunkirk property. As the medical tech finished patching up her face, a pair of detectives approached.

The older one said his name was Urich and that he would like to talk with her for a couple of minutes. He was going to send her back to the station with his partner Detective Cole, but before that, it was particularly essential that she tell him as much as she could remember.

In the distance, Dunkirk was being airlifted from the ravine. Ashley watched the police vehicles winch up the killer's unconscious body. She remained silent.

Urich looked at his partner, "They're taking him to our place?"

"Should be, but I'll double check," Cole said, turning away to make the call.

Urich turned back to Ashley. "So, Princess. Can you tell me what happened?"

Ashley looked at the man's face. He wasn't being condescending with her when he said 'Princess'. Her father never called her that. Ash decided she didn't mind, In fact, she kind of liked it. "Mr. Dunkirk killed his family," she said.

"That's whose house this is, with all the dead bodies in it?"

"Yes, the Dunkirk's."

"So, what happened?"

Ashley paused for a moment, trying to gather her thoughts.

Urich misread her hesitation for distrust. "Look. We're here to help you. We need to know what happened. The more you tell us, the more we can help you, better." he smiled, clumsily. It was disarming, despite his otherwise gruff appearance.

Ashley laughed at the detective's unintended humor. She took a breath. "I met Bobby Dunkirk in the forest, he lives here. He said he needed my help; that his dad was going to kill his mom and would I go in and check."

Ashley blinked into the afternoon sun. There was no quick or easy way to explain everything, so she started with the important facts. "He's a lot younger than me, and he was really scared."

"Where's Bobby now?"

"I don't know. He was gone when I came out. Did you get the pictures I sent?" she asked.

Urich looked over to Cole.

"These?" Cole held out the photos Ashley had sent to 911 on his screen.

"There's more," she said.

"What do you mean, more? More what?" Urich asked.

"More bodies," Ash answered. "Out that way." She pointed out into the canyon. "A lot more."

"Could you show us?" Urich asked.

Ash nodded, "It's not far." She climbed down from the back of the ambulance and led the detectives down into the forested canyon.

Two uniformed officers accompanied Ashley and the detectives as they hiked down the trails. Fifteen minutes later they stood at the bottom of the stuffed gorge. The two young officers threw up, as did Detective Cole. Only Urich held it together, and Ashley, although this was her second time around.

Just as the officers managed to regain their composure, Cole's radio went off. "Detective Urich, Detective Cole, we've got feds up here. They'd like a word with you," the officer on the radio explained. "They're really pretty agitated."

"Already?" Urich sighed and shook his head.

"What's that about?" Cole muttered, reaching for the handset.

"They're looking for me," Ashley said.

"It has nothing to do with you," Urich replied.

"Two weeks ago my parents were murdered. An hour ago, Mr. Dunkirk told me that he killed my mom. He told me that he was hired to do it, he said it was business and that he killed his wife for pleasure."

"He talked to you," Urich asked. "You didn't tell us that he talked to you."

"I didn't tell you lots of things. If I had told you my name, I might be dead already."

Urich looked up at the stack of corpses and remained quiet for a couple of moments. "Two weeks ago, huh?" he asked, after a prolonged silence. "And he said he was hired to kill your mom?" Urich asked.

"One of the Agents shot my dad. They were waiting for him. They had the whole house surrounded."

"You saw them?" Urich asked.

Ashley nodded. "This morning they caught my little brother." She was beginning to tear up.

Urich knelt to meet her at eye level. "Well, then, your name has to be Ashley Fox, doesn't it?"

Ashley didn't answer but became much calmer. She suddenly realized that she had no reason to consider herself safe, surrounded by these four men. For all she knew, they were every bit as dangerous as everyone else she'd encountered recently.

Urich stood up straight. He looked around the forest, not at the pile of corpses, but at the trails leading to and from their position. He scanned the tree lines and horizon, apparently looking for anything out of the ordinary.

"We heard about your parents," he said. "Me and Cole here, we're homicide detectives. That means when someone turns up dead, they call me, or one of my friends. It's not as if you can call some other police department, there's only one. You could say we've got a monopoly on solving murders. So even if the victim is a famous whatever, it's all the same clean up crew. When we don't get a call, on a double homicide, like what happened to your parents, then we just know something's rotten somewhere."

"Oh, we heard about it. The Feds are required to file paperwork with the state. In order to clear it with the AG, they were forced to file your address. That means we get notified, after the fact, of course. We should have been at the scene."

Urich looked up to the towering gulch of limbs and dirt then back to Ashley. "So what I'm telling you is that I believe you. And I'm going to order my partner to believe you. He has to do whatever I tell him. We're going to

help you, but you have to help us too, okay?"

Ashley nodded.

"Tell him everything. Don't leave anything out."

Ashley realized Detective Urich was about the same age as her father, maybe a little older, maybe the age of Mr. Dunkirk. Ashley also realized the heavily muscled detective could probably eat Mr. Dunkirk for breakfast.

"My partner is going to take you back to our office. You stay right next to him. If it weren't illegal, I'd tell you to keep your hand in his pocket. Tell him anything that you think may be significant. We need to find out who's behind all this."

"I know who it was," Ashley said. "It was National Intelligence Director Stanwood and Deputy Director Von Kalt."

Urich turned to Cole, "Take her back to the station. Get her statement."

"Don't you want to be there for that?" Cole asked.

"I'm going to be here for a while, and we need her on record now. Don't file, just take it and sit on it. I don't even want anyone to hear her name until I get back. She's just another juvenile witness, nobody special. Don't let her out of arm's reach, handcuffs, if necessary, understood?"

Cole nodded.

"I'll go back up this way with the uniforms. Once you get out of this mess, just call the car over to you, I'll put it on remote once I get up there. It took fifteen minutes to get down here, so give me twenty or thirty to get back up there. Don't even call it for an hour. If the spooks see our cruiser pull out empty, they'll know something's up."

"What the hell are we going to do for an hour?" Cole asked.

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd get the fuck out of dodge. What's an hour? I just don't want the car taking off two seconds after I walk away from it. They're feds, but they're not stupid."

Cole nodded.

Urich looked to Ash and raised his finger to his lips. He then looked at the two uniformed officers and said, "Same goes for you. What you saw here today, you take it to the grave, understand? Direct order."

The patrolmen both nodded.

If Urich had some hidden agenda for Ashley, she thought he was doing a marvelous job of hiding it.

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Deputy Director Von Kalt could smell the girl. She had been here, so

recently, just minutes ago. He could feel the presence of the other, the First, the Micronix, but he was better. He was the Metachron. He had the power of forty thousand; she was only one.

Detective Ulrich crested the hill with the uniformed detectives. One of the crime scene techs directed him over to the Federal officers, standing near the cruisers.

“Where is she?” Von Kalt demanded, not even waiting for proper introductions.

“You mean he? The suspect has been taken into custody.”

“She is extremely dangerous. We believe this child has been in contact with terrorist organizations. She has information that is vital to national security.”

“I’m sorry, you must be confused. We’re investigating multiple homicides here. You feds must be so used to muscling in, you must have gotten your parties mixed up.”

Ulrich moved to walk past, but Von Kalt drew his weapon. “I am Deputy Director Von Kalt of the National Security Agency. This is a matter of national security.”

Von Kalt slowly but deliberately raised his pistol to Ulrich’s face.

Ulrich smiled.

Every officer at the crime scene drew their weapons and pointed them at Von Kalt. He didn’t need the multiple surveillance angles of the Metachron to see he was outnumbered. Von Kalt smelled another scent on the breeze. Despite the dozens of weapons in his face, he looked across the canyon.

Bobby stood, watching them from a nearby rise. He was still wearing his all white suit, and Oscar was with him.

The police and Von Kalt could not see, but Bobby held the three intact bullets in his right hand, and the three spent shells in his left.

Von Kalt could not see them, but he knew they were there.

Bobby turned and walked from the rise. Oscar remained where he’d been sitting, untroubled by the boy’s abrupt exit.

Ulrich nodded, and several officers set out after Bobby, but all they found was Oscar, who happened to wander across their path some time later.

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## Chapter 30 - Faith Without Works

Cole let Ashley take the lead as they hiked out of the forest. She headed for a street that ran parallel to her own, but was half way up the opposite canyon. They saw no one as she and Detective Cole walked up the block, arriving at their destination.

The house was at the apex of the hill, facing the open canyon. Ashley was worried that she wouldn't recognize the structure from the front, but it wasn't difficult.

"I came to get proof," Ashley told Detective Cole. "This is where it is."

"Dunkirk was an accident?"

"When I ran into Bobby in the forest, this is where I was coming."

"Who is Bobby again?" Cole asked.

"Bobby Dunkirk, he's the youngest son. I met him in the forest, when I was on my way here."

"And where is here?" Cole asked, looking at the imposing, yet plainly abandoned structure.

A layer of soft, fine dirt, blown by the wind, covered the driveway and the walk leading to the door.

"I don't think anyone is here."

"I came back for the security footage, and this is where it is," Ash said.

Ash walked up the driveway, surprised that Cole didn't stop her. In fact, he stayed right next to her.

Ash slipped her hand into her pocket and held the device. She waved her other palm in front of the access panel.

The door chirped, depressurized and hissed open. Cole followed Ashley inside.

A car screeched to a halt in the driveway behind them. Ash and Cole turned back to the door as two suited agents exited the car. Seeing Ashley and Cole, they deliberately calmed down, surveyed the surroundings and

respectfully approached.

"Hello Ashley, I'm Chief Warrant Officer Lee," he spoke to Ash, but extended his hand to Detective Cole, breaking eye contact with her to look at him.

"Detective Cole," he said, as they shook.

"How do you know my name?" Ashley asked.

"What are you doing at this house?" Lee asked.

"You're on my father's security team, aren't you?"

Lee nodded and bowed slightly, "At your service."

"It was you that Ross saw," Ashley said. "He thought you were the bad guys staking out my house."

"Oh, they're here too. Don't be fooled." Lee smiled and nodded.

"They almost caught when you stopped by your home. It was only because they pulled one team off to replace them with a fresh crew. You hit the only window in months of surveillance. We were all very impressed. Congratulations."

"What happened to you guys? When they came for my Mom and Dad, why didn't you stop them?"

"They came here about an hour earlier, arrested everyone. They had warrants with our names. There was nothing we could do. We haven't come back to this location, but we've kept them out too. We have lawyers protesting the entire fiasco, everything is frozen until it gets settled in court."

"I need evidence," Ashley said.

Lee smiled. Inside he showed them around the equipment. All the monitors were still operational, displaying real time feeds of Ashley's house and street. The four motion sensitive relays were trained on various sections of the ongoing investigation, while the oscillating and static positions displayed only assigned locations.

Several high-powered rifles and large bore weapons were trained on various positions around her family home. Crosshairs over street level doors; the front, sides and even the landing pad, all covered.

Lee pulled up the date of the attack. He scanned through the footage, slowing as the rooftop landing pad and front lawn suddenly filled with black vehicles and heavily armed federal agents.

"That's them," Ash said.

Lee backed up a few minutes and switched through the focal ranges. He found the infrared and panned through the house. Ash saw her mom coming up to the main floor from downstairs. Even though her figure was represented as light, translated by the heat in her body, Ashley could



recognize her mother's walk.

"We've stayed away from the residence since you were taken. We thought you were taken. We've been staking out the neighborhood. Your place and here, waiting for something to break."

The infrared footage revealed a thick-bodied man entering the kitchen from a door on the back of the house. She watched her mother enter the room, and their glowing silhouettes merged as the intruder pounced. They struggled for a few moments and Ashley watched liquid heat began to run down the legs of her mother and the intruder. The white liquid pooled around their feet, spread and slowly faded to a cooler purplish-blue.

On the monitors, a streak of light rushed into the room and drove the thick shape of the intruder from her mother's form. Ashley recognized his shape; the new, quick moving light was her father. The intruder fled through the same door he'd entered. Ashley watched as her father caught her mother and together, they sunk to the floor. More liquid heat pooled around them and then faded.

Lee panned over to the side of the house, where the intruder was entering an uninterrupted shot. He switched back to full color, and the image snapped into focus; it was Martin Dunkirk, he was covered with blood and grinning.

Lee scanned forward in time; they watched the federal forces assemble on her front lawn. The front doors stood open. Soon soldiers wheeled out someone in a white body bag, presumably the body of Ashley's mom.

Ash watched as her father burst from the house, his hands and shirtfront, covered in blood. The lead agent, the man who was obviously in charge, Director Stanwood drew a pistol and raised it.

Dr. Fox said something to Stanwood, but the agent pulled the trigger; the pistol fired and Ashley's father fell, mortally wounded. Lee rewound the footage and turned up the audio. Microphones, set on the property, played back the words her father said as he came out of the house.

"Joe, you have to help, Ana. Please, Stanwood..."

Then the pistol fired. It sounded so loud; it may as well have been in the room.

Dr. Fox fell again.

Stanwood motioned for the soldiers to pack up Dr. Fox's body. They rolled it onto a white frosted body bag and carried it to one of the waiting transports.

"We need a copy of this," Cole said.

Lee selected the time range, less than four minutes from start to finish, and exported a clip. He opened a network browser and copied the clip into a dozen mirrored storage accounts. Lee wrote a network address down and handed it to Ash, who smiled and nodded, "Thank you."

Cole fixed one of the live cameras on a hostile argument between Ulrich and Von Kalt across the canyon.

"That's Deputy Director Von Kalt." Ashley said. "He's trying to kill me."

Ashley and Detective Cole reached the police station a little after dark. Once in his office, Cole logged in and had no trouble locating Ashley's brother, Geoff. He was at a juvenile holding facility not far from where he'd been picked up.

Cole filed a request for Geoff, a material witness, to be brought up to his office immediately. It was routed through official channels to the facility supervisor, who sent Geoff along with a young social worker. Unfortunately, they were sent by way of public shuttle, an hour's ride at least, maybe two if the shuttle had prior scheduled deliveries.

Cole's phone rang. "What's going on?" he asked. Cole picked up a sheet of paper from the tray of the desktop printer. "Yeah. It's here. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, it says. Material warrant for all persons, property or information pertaining to the ongoing investigation into Sixth Gate Citizen Dr. Andrew Fox, matter of national security, blah, blah, blah. Yeah, there are twelve, numbered and signed." Cole listened for a moment.

All Ashley could hear was frantic yelling from the other end of the line.

"What, Dunkirk? Yeah, sure, I'll triple it. Hold on, I'll be right back." Cole set down the receiver and gestured for Ashley to stay put. He rose and left the office.

Ashley found herself immediately bored. She picked up the warrant. There were indeed twelve names and their corresponding signatures.

Ashley opened the drawer to Cole's desk. There were two guns, a small revolver and a pistol. Ashley tucked the revolver into her belt and silently closed the drawer. After a minute or so, she leaned over to the computer and pulled up one of the storage mirrors Lee had given her for the footage. She downloaded the surveillance file and opened it. She watched it seven times before the detective returned.

Cole paid no attention to the video clip running on his screen and picked up the phone. "He's in the interrogation wing. They brought in a bed.

We've got four guys on him, he's not going anywhere."

A large commotion at the doors to the office distracted Cole from his call. He set down the phone; the storm at the other end of the line had reached them.

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## Chapter 31 - Synthesis and Catharsis

Three uniformed officers tried to keep out a throng of black suited agents. They pushed right through them and through the doors into the detectives' offices. Urich was also there, with a couple of other detectives and officers, attempting to keep the federal agents from entering, but they couldn't hold them back.

The entire swarm of people flowed into the detective's workspace, filling the open corridors between desks with angry, shouting, law-enforcement officials.

When Deputy Director Von Kalt, who was at the center of the fracas, saw Ashley, he froze. Von Kalt pointed at her and shouted, "This is a case of National Security! You're obstructing Justice! You're all under Arrest!"

Ashley pulled out the detective's revolver and pointed it at Von Kalt.

The room fell silent.

No one moved or spoke and to her utter shock, no one raised a weapon at her.

Deputy Director Von Kalt didn't answer.

"This warrant says you're after me. You killed my parents and now you want to kill me? You think I'm a threat to National Security?"

Detective Cole reached down to his computer and hit a button. The video Ashley had opened was instantly broadcast to the large wall-mounted screens around the room. Its sound silenced the onlookers.

The assembled officers and agents watched the footage. They saw Dunkirk emerge from the house, covered in blood. They saw Dr. Fox approach Director Stanwood, asking for help. Deputy Director Von Kalt was there, standing next to Stanwood. Dr. Fox called Stanwood by name and he shot him.

As the video started again, a new group of agents arrived in the detective's offices. There was hardly enough room for all the angry law enforcement officials.

He entered with the second batch of Agents. It was him: National

Intelligence Director Joseph Stanwood. He was there, in front of her. He boldly stared at her.

Ashley smiled. She folded the warrant and tucked it into her back pocket, moving her aim from Von Kalt to Stanwood and taking hold of the weapon with both hands.

Ashley was positioned behind Cole's desk, near an open hallway door. Cole stood next to her, and she saw no guns in anyone else's hands, yet.

"What the hell is this?" Stanwood asked. "You're just going to let a child stand there, holding all of you at gunpoint?"

Over the speakers, a shot was fired. Stanwood looked at the closest screen. He saw the image of himself, standing over Dr. Fox's body.

Detective Urich stepped forward, confronting Stanwood. "My witness isn't going anywhere with you. Neither is my prisoner. I believe we have plenty of evidence to place both of you under arrest."

"Is that a fact?" Director Stanwood said. "Habeas corpus has been suspended? You are a homicide detective; if you intend to charge someone with murder, you need the body, don't you?"

No one replied.

"Might I also point out the fact that Dr. Fox violated dozens of international laws and was actively threatening the state? He was in possession of advanced weaponry and threatened to hold the entire country hostage. The man was a danger to himself, as well as those around him. The warrant is perfectly legal. Now, if you obstruct me in any way, I will shoot you myself. Turn over my prisoners; both children," Stanwood glared at Ashley, "And The Dunkirk." Stanwood referred to Dunkirk as if he were a thing, a weapon or some sort of monster.

The small doors on the far side of the office opened. A uniformed police officer entered first, slowly, with another officer close behind. The first man was plainly scared. He'd been struck above the left eye; his forehead was swollen and cut. The holster at his belt was empty, as were his hands.

The man behind him, the somewhat mobile Martin Dunkirk, wore a police issue vest and jacket as he held the young officer with a gun to his back. "Looks like this is as far as we go," Dunkirk said.

The officer swallowed.

Ashley switched her aim from Stanwood to Dunkirk.

Everyone pulled weapons.

The moment seemed to stretch into infinity.

The hostage officer was wearing a bulletproof vest, and Ashley had the shot, but she hesitated.

As Dunkirk raised his shotgun, Ashley snapped out of it and fired, hitting Dunkirk in the arm.

Everyone seemed to fire and dive for cover at nearly the same time.

Dunkirk jerked the trigger, blasting at Ash and Cole, but Urich jumped in front of the shot, sacrificing himself for his partner and the girl.

Cole flipped the desk. Ashley reached out swept her hand over eight light switches; plunging the floor into darkness.

As the light vanished she marked Stanwood's position and scrambled to avoid the officers pursuing Dunkirk, who confidently dragged his hostage down one of the nearby hallways.

Cole tended to the wounded Detective Urich. He'd taken some of the scatter shot to his arms and shoulder, but his vest saved him from life-threatening injury. Von Kalt went with the agents and officers in pursuit of Dunkirk.

Ash slipped through the shadows behind cabinets and desks until she found herself just a short distance from the waiting Director Stanwood. She held the Micronix in her right hand and the detective's revolver in the other.

The sounds of the pursuit returned. Dunkirk had become ensnared in the famous police department maze and was on his way back to them. Expectantly, they all turned toward the hall where Dunkirk would emerge. Ash crept closer to Stanwood.

There was a small credenza between the director and what would be the oncoming pursuit, and he was a bit further obscured by a couple of filing cabinets.

As Dunkirk and his hostage backed into the Detectives' Hall, he did a double take, immediately frustrated to realize he'd simply moved in a circle.

Ashley leaned out from behind Stanwood, plainly seeing Dunkirk and being seen by him. She glared, deliberately taunting him.

Dunkirk abandoned his hostage and opened fire on Ash with both weapons, hitting Director Stanwood several times. Ashley safely hid behind a credenza and the Director.

Dunkirk's aim was off due to the impact of several police-fired rounds. He replied with bursts from the shotgun. Pursued, the fight raged on, into another section of the station.

It had all happened in moments. Stanwood was aware of Ashley's presence, but now he was also wounded. As he spun to confront her, Ashley stepped forward. Her right hand shot up past his neck, punching the extended Micronix blade into the left side of his throat.

"I remember how long time lasted, when I first touched this thing,"

she said. "I hope you're feeling every last second of this."

As Stanwood collapsed to the floor, Ashley pulled the blade all the way around to the other side of his neck, opening it from one side to the other. She stared into his eyes as he exhaled through his throat. The oxygen-deprived system slowly ceased its conscious understanding and experience.

Crouched low, Ashley had not been seen. Cole and Urich were on the other side of the credenza and a few other obstacles. Using the natural cover, Ashley crept out of the detectives' wing.

She quickly found a restroom and stopped to ditch the gun and wash the blood from her hands. From there, according to the evacuation placard glued to the wall, it was no more than thirty steps to an unguarded stairwell.

Ashley moved quickly, but without hurrying.

By the time her brain realized it had been too easy, it was too late. Ashley was halfway down the first flight when she saw Deputy Director Von Kalt. He was just standing there, waiting for her.

He was holding his gun at his side. He was also holding the second prototype. She could see it. She could feel it.

It was called the Metachron.

Ashley was still holding the Micronix herself. She hadn't retracted the blade. She had washed it, in the bathroom, but the matte black edge was still exposed to the cool night air.

Ash felt an alien confidence well up from deep within her. She stood up straight and walked calmly toward the hostile agent.

Coming down the stairs, they both knew her power.

Ashley reached Von Kalt, and saying nothing, she simply held out her empty hand.

Von Kalt could have raised the gun, but instead he placed the Metachron prototype in Ashley's hand.

He then stepped aside and allowed her to exit past him.

As she reached the landing below, she heard him exhale, followed but a loud pop and the sound of his body falling onto the hard metal steps.

Three floors later, Ashley retraced the blade and pocketed the Micronix. She was evacuated right out the front door with dozens of other people. A crowd was beginning to form due to the ongoing chaos, and naturally, no one was being allowed to enter.

Not far from the shuttle gates, Ashley spotted a familiar little head, struggling to see above the adults and catch a glimpse of what was going on. Geoffrey and a young social worker watched the building, along with dozens

of onlookers.

Ashley made her way over to them, gesturing for him to stay quiet. From just a few feet away, Ash gestured for Geoff to slip away from the social worker. She looked like a nice enough girl, but she could cause real trouble for them if she were to insist on delivering Geoffrey to Detective Cole.

Geoffrey inched further and further away from the distracted girl. Before long he simply turned and walked away from her. Moments later the happily reunited brother and sister were sprinting away from the police station, dodging pedestrians, giggling and laughing, the chaos behind them forgotten.

By midnight, Ash and Geoff had reached the second backup cruiser, the one they hadn't used when escaping from St. Vincent's. There was plenty of room for them to stretch out and the three monitors enabled them to surf several video streams at once.

They tried not to watch the news, but Dunkirk was everywhere. He managed to escape from the police station in an ambulance by taking another officer hostage. The pursuing units lost him when he hijacked a second vehicle in a nearby parking garage.

There was no mention of Ashley, Stanwood or Detective Urich.

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Dr. Martin Evander Dunkirk III; father, once a frontline battle surgeon, now esteemed land owner and patron of the arts, had joined the ranks of infamous sociopaths. With over a hundred victims discovered in the first few weeks of the investigation, Dunkirk became an overnight sensation; tastelessly referred to as the Calistan Canyon Killer.

Over the next few days, the whole world watched the reports; the footage of bodies being airlifted out of the ravine was ghastly. The commentary often bluntly pointed to the fact that most of the bodies were those of children. Time-lapsed footage of the forest showed body bag after body bag flowing out of the verdant canyon in an unending stream.

Soon, the police got warrants for the buildings owned by Mr. Dunkirk and the horror show expanded to several new locations. For years, he'd been abducting and murdering all varieties of people, some were his tenants, others complete strangers.

Martin was defined as a true 'killer of opportunity'. He hadn't been particular about age or appearance, his victims ranged from children to the



elderly. Where most other killers stuck with a specific type, Dunkirk enjoyed variety. At its peak, the investigation included two hundred, twenty-seven corpses, and sixty-four other missing persons.

Mr. Martin Dunkirk's first victim had been his mother, at age thirteen. Originally her death had been ruled an accident. They reopened the case and found there was sufficient evidence pointing to Martin. Whatever effect Bobby's tainted bullets might have had on Martin's psychosis, they were not the seeds of its genesis.

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Ashley did hear from Dr. Te again. After she and Geoff retrieved the second spare car Ross had left for them, Ash put the autopilot on an endless freeway loop, and they took a nap.

Ashley woke to discover Lao sitting inside their transport. She nodded, but didn't speak, greeting him with words in her mind, "It's good to see you," she said, hoping to let Geoff continue sleeping.

"It's good to see you too," Lao replied. "I'm glad to find you healthy and whole."

Ashley smiled.

"Seems you were successful, the heat is off?" Lao asked.

"I don't know about successful, our parents are still gone," Ashley answered.

Ashley thought she saw something flash across Lao's face, but he changed the subject. "It would appear that Mr. Dunkirk has become the administration's chief priority."

"Better him than me," Ashley replied.

Geoff woke up and looked over at Ash but didn't see Dr. Te.

"He doesn't know?" Ashley asked silently.

"I haven't introduced myself yet," Lao replied.

"He's better with this thing than I am." Ashley looked at the prototype in her hand.

"In time, in time."

Ash nodded.

"So, what will you do now?" Dr. Te asked.

"A month ago, I would have gone to ballet school," Ash said.

"And now?"

"Now?" She paused. "I think we're going to hit every theme park between here and Timbuktu."

Lao laughed.

Ashley liked the sound of his laughter; it made her laugh too.  
"What's so funny?" Geoff asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.  
"Nothing kiddo, nothing at all. What do you want to do today?" she asked.  
"Um, roller coasters?" Geoff asked.  
"Awesome," Ashley replied, smiling.  
Lao smiled, nodded and blinked out of the car.

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After several weeks on the road, Ashley and Geoff agreed that, with summer ending, they had to do something different. In some ways, Lao's conversation with Ashley helped set their final destination.

The past weeks had seen them visit nearly every tourist attraction and fair in the country, but now kids everywhere were going back to school. They wouldn't be able to pretend they were on vacation much longer.

Ashley plotted a course for Angel City. Geoff asked her if she thought going back home was a bright idea. Ash didn't answer.

At a truck stop outside Angel City, she picked up an electric razor and made Geoff shave her head.

Later that day, Ashley and Geoff arrived at the Flying Dragons Martial Arts Academy and presented themselves for check in at the front desk. A bit of digital preparation on Geoff's part made the paperwork a breeze. He'd used the Micronix to fill out the applications and forward their transcripts from Rivendell before they arrived. Once the tuition charges successfully processed, there was nothing to worry about.

However, due to the short notice and their late arrival, Ashton and Geoffrey would be rooming together, which was actually what they wanted; it would be the best possible way for Ash to maintain her disguise as a boy.

For her own part, Ashley attacked the new art / sport with the same single-minded devotion she'd shown for dance. Whenever news of Dunkirk's continuing escapades reached the girl, she redoubled her efforts.

The next time she ran into Mr. Martin Dunkirk, she would finish the job. He ran circles around the police and she knew, eventually, he would come for her. She would be ready, or she would be dead.

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## **Epilogue - Here There Be Dragons**

A week after the horrors of Calistan Way, a pair of uniformed patrolmen wandered through the ocean-side park where Bobby slept. Their early morning duties largely consisted of chasing away the neighborhood indigents, but a homeless child called for more immediate intervention. A social services team was called out, and Bobby was transported back to a local holding station. It didn't take long to identify the silent child and deliver him to his new home.

District Thirteen, the Angel City Orphanage and Juvenile Detention Facility, housed almost ten percent of the metropolitan orphan population. The district maintained prenatal care for infants, school for orphaned students and a massive wing for the criminally inclined delinquents of Angel City.

Bobby hadn't uttered a word since his apprehension. Silent amidst a teeming sea of children, he wandered the district, seeking hidden, quiet, out-of-the-way places where he might gaze upon his gleaming treasure of brass, copper, and lead.

Within a few days, Bobby discovered an abandoned wing of the orphanage. Wandering, he noted the strong scent of death and decay. The boy followed his nose and soon encountered a cruelly deformed guard. The man was a colossal hulking brute and his eyes glittered with malicious intent.

Bobby approached with an honest, open expression and promptly showed the man his bullets. The monster smiled and led Bobby through several locked doors into a concealed section of the district. The reek of death was overpowering. They passed through a bloodstained dorm, beds gone black with gore. That was when Bobby first began to hear the cries.

They entered another dorm, filled with children, all chained to their beds. Several had been viscosly beaten or were the victims of hideous disfigurements. Gruesome scars adorned their young bodies, holes in the flesh, when internal organs had been removed, stitched closed with stiff black thread. Those not chained to the beds were largely amputees. Misery, pain and torment, enveloped them.

Bobby realized that he once again stood with Death. He found that he

didn't mind the stench of their suffering. In fact, he rather relished it. The pain and suffering of others made him acutely aware of his own excellent health, his own good fortune. He felt Death was a wise and generous friend, the only friend he needed. He felt honored to be so warmly wrapped in its embrace.

\*\*\*

It was after Thanksgiving and before Christmas that Morgenstern got a line on his former associate, Mr. Dunkirk. He was in Phoenix. The battle-scarred giant packed provisions for the trip and double-checked his route into the desert.

The grizzled veteran had once worked as a surgical assistant to then Dr. Dunkirk. He was now employed aboard the Angel City Orphanage / Juvenile Detention Facility, working as its coroner. It wasn't everything he'd ever hoped for in life, but it did provide an unending feast of delicious victims. Franklin Gustav Morgenstern had accepted his appetites early in life.

His co-conspirators aboard the floating orphanage, Governor Maime and Warden Keller, were both intrigued by the proposal of meeting the infamous Dunkirk. They wished him safe travels and hoped he returned soon.

Before Morgenstern set off, he stopped by Bobby's room to let him know he may have a surprise for him in a couple of days. The light reflecting off Bobby's necklace of brass shells made the lethal serial killer smile.

Bobby asked Morgenstern to reaffirm his pledge; once they found his father, they'd go after the person responsible, the one who'd betrayed him and informed the police.

Morgenstern nodded, he was fascinated by what he'd heard of Miss Ashley Fox; she sounded like marvelous sport. He was greatly looking forward to that hunt.

**END**





## **About the Author**

John Carrick grew up in a small northern Illinois town, not quite rural and not quite suburban. His childhood involved wandering through forests and reading everything he could get his hands on. He spent four years with Uncle Sam's Misguided Children and holds a degree in computer science. Writing is the most rewarding part of his life, and he refuses to write about himself in the 3rd person.

Rob Newman  
Alpha Channel Books – Acquisitions Editor

P.S. John's next volume in The Trials of Ash is finished and receiving a final copy edit, by yours truly. So stay tuned to Alpha Channel Books for The Legend of Ashley Fox.





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