

Lily's Story

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Sept 2016

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Lily's Story

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Arts

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Dedications

This book is dedicated to my folks, who never forced me to be an engineer or a doctor.

Also, to Tamara Jones and Kate Sterns, who gave me the inspiration and discipline (in that order) to become a writer.

And, finally, to one of my two cats (you know which one you are).

ABSTRACT

Technology is in a constant state of evolution, and our history is littered with miraculous inventions. However, one invention stands out with particular significance: the internet. In the future, I imagine people will look back and realize that what we created was not just a series of interconnected computers but—godlike— a whole new world.

Lily's Story is a novel concerned with the role of humanity in this increasingly technological and internet-centric world. It aims to examine traditional conceptions of humanism in the face of post-humanism and artificial-intelligence, and the function of the physical in a society that is becoming exponentially more digital. By blurring the lines between the real and the unreal, I hope to inspire the reader to reconsider the line that divides the two.

CHAPTER 01

“I don't think I'd would count this among the wisest decisions we've ever made,” Jack said, his voice competing with the chorus of beastly wails growing louder with each passing second.

Lyle turned his head to look at Jack. “What? Why?”

The gnashing of teeth and thunder of hooves against marble added to the cacophony, nearly drowning him out. Beyond the light cast down weakly by the silver braziers, Jack could perceive movement in the darkness – not just one or two lonely figures, but rather dozens of formless masses, all moving in concert towards them. It was as though the shadows themselves were undulating, threatening to surge forth and engulf the light, along with the two adventurers that stood in the centre of it.

Jack let out an exasperated sigh, but before he could formulate any further response, the first of their foes leapt from the darkness, a set of claws raised above its head. Before its hooves could reconnect with the floor, Lyle brought his broadsword down in a massive arc, separating its head, right shoulder, and arm from the rest of its body. As the creature's head fell at Lyle's feet, its serrated jaw was still snapping hungrily, its eyes still burning crimson.

Another of the beasts lunged towards Jack, undaunted by the fate of its kin. As Jack ducked, narrowly avoiding its lethal swipe, his pair of obsidian daggers found the legs of the beast, deftly slashing into the bulging muscles packed beneath its gray skin. Upon landing behind Jack, the thing was unable to regain its footing and crumpled harmlessly to the checkered tiles.

Soon, the full brunt of the hoard was upon them. The skirmish that followed was a frantic flurry of claws and blades, the sound of steel meeting flesh and bone echoing throughout the great hall. Before long, Jack and Lyle had dispatched the greater number of the things, and dealing with the wounded survivors was finished swiftly and without ceremony.

“See?” said Lyle once the last of the creatures was dead. “You worry too much.”

He twirled his gigantic sword in one hand. Lyle had a tendency towards theatrics, which

often annoyed Jack. Lyle knew this, Jack suspected.

As if on cue, the delicate flames that lined the walls suddenly erupted into fireballs that completely engulfed the braziers, blackening their fine, silver finish. The fireballs remained constant, as though being fuelled by some invisible energy. Their new-found vitality brought the hall into light, and for the first time, Jack could see clearly the vaulted ceiling high above, the grand portraits of distinguished lords and ladies plastering the walls, and the banquet table of polished oak before them, long enough to seat at least a hundred.

The massive two-story doors at the far end of the hall began to open, the ancient iron hinges groaning under the strain. In another show of bravado, Lyle leapt up onto the table, apparently eager to meet the forthcoming challenge. Once the doors had fully opened to reveal a solid wall of shadow on the other side, there was a moment of stillness. Jack raised his daggers into a well-practised combat stance, and Lyle did likewise. After several more seconds of grim waiting, the silence was broken by the sound of metal scraping against stone. Distant at first, it grew louder as its source made its agonizingly slow approach. Then, as the scraping was at the cusp of the threshold, from the shadows beyond the door emerged a towering behemoth, squatting to fit through the frame. Stepping into the hall, it straightened itself, but the figure was hidden beneath a tattered burgundy robe. The only part of its body not obscured by the robe was its face, which was masked. Jack recognized this as a plague doctor's mask, with a long beak-like nose and circular, gaping glass eyes that stared unblinking and without emotion at the pair of intruders. It raised its colossal scythe – which it had evidently been dragging behind it – overhead. The scythe itself was so large that even the twenty-or-so foot monster before them looked as though it should not have been able to lift it. The abomination standing before Jack and Lyle was known as The Necromancer, and it was the reason they had come.

“I'll go high,” Lyle began, “you—”

Before he could finish, The Necromancer bolted across the length of the hall with unnatural speed and swung its weapon, rending Lyle in half. What was left of him had not even

fallen to the floor before The Necromancer turned its attention to Jack. He cursed under his breath and vaulted backwards over one of the chairs placed at the table, giving him enough distance from the monster to narrowly avoid sharing Lyle's fate. The scythe sailed beneath him in a horizontal arc, exploding the chair into millions of splinters. Landing on the table, Jack thought he saw an opening and lunged, dagger-first, towards the exposed midsection of his foe. Inches away from connecting, he felt a crushing pain in his ribs. Before he slammed into the nearby wall, he had the wherewithal to realize that The Necromancer had reversed its initial swing, catching Jack with the blunt side of the scythe's head. As he collapsed into a heap at the foot of the wall, his body racked with agony, he looked up just in time to see the blade begin its descent directly above him. He shut his eyes and prepared for death. *I knew this would happen.* But before the fatal blow could be dealt, Jack heard the distinct *twang* of a bowstring.

The Necromancer jolted, and the scythe froze inches from Jack's forehead. The beast looked down, its glassy eyes transfixed on its own sternum. It then moved its gaze to the wall above Jack's head, where a black arrow had embedded itself into the stone. From where he lay slumped, Jack could see a collection of glowing green runes pulsating along the shaft of the arrow. Jack took this opening to scramble away from the wall – not to escape The Necromancer, but rather the arrow. Suddenly, the arrow exploded into a whirlwind of green fire, which quickly spread across the wall in a flaming circle, roughly three meters in diameter. The fire dissipated from its centre, leaving what appeared to be a hole in the wall. From where he had crawled, he could see it wasn't a hole that led to the outside of the castle, but instead to the infinite vastness of space. Through the portal, Jack could see stars, nebulae, and even what looked like a far-off purple planet with a set of thin rings. The Necromancer, unconcerned that it had just been pierced straight-through by the arrow, seemed mesmerized by the portal, even lowering its weapon. *Poor sap,* Jack thought.

Just as The Necromancer leaned forward, curiously transfixed, a massive, scaly green hand violently thrust through the portal, wrapping its claws around the neck of the unsuspecting

Necromancer. Dropping its scythe, it wrapped its own hands around the wrist of the unseen assailant, attempting to wrestle away the hand. Totally unfazed, the green hand maintained its hold for a few seconds longer – perhaps just to allow The Necromancer to struggle in futility – before it suddenly wrenched its grip sideways, eliciting a sickening snap from its victim's neck. Jack flinched in disgust. The Necromancer hung limply in the grasp of its slayer for a second longer before being released, landing in an unceremonious heap near Jack. The hand was pulled back through the portal, which then disappeared in a flourish of green fire.

Jack looked up at the door of the hall where stood Ashira of Atharath, bow in hand. Jack knew her as Kira.

“I told you,” she said in her I-told-you-so voice, half an octave higher than her normal one, “The Necromancer is a glass canon. It can dish it out, but it can't take it. You should just hit it with your best ranged attack before it can do anything.”

Jack groaned and hoisted himself to his feet. “You know I don't specialize in ranged attacks.”

“Well, maybe you should have told me you were coming. I would've joined you.”

She was trying to make it sound as though he had just been foolish and headstrong, but there was a tinge of hurt in her voice. She didn't want to ask outright, but bringing it up was her way of probing.

“We need loot too, you know,” Lyle piped up, having been resurrected now that The Necromancer was no more. He pointed to the golden chest that stood where its body had been seconds earlier. He was referring to the fact that only the player who killed the boss would receive half-decent items as a reward. “You're always taking the good shit.”

“I can't help it if I'm the best,” Kira shrugged, a cocky smile on her face.

If she did suspect anything was up with Jack, she was putting it away for now. *Is there something up with me?* He hadn't decided yet.

Kira strolled over to the chest, opened it, and then opened her inventory. The screen

hovered a foot in front of her as she navigated through it with her hand. Although the window was visible to Lyle and Jack, only Kira was permitted to observe its contents. She let out a low whistle, making a show of her newly-acquired prizes.

“Wow,” she said in that distinct way only an Australian could say “wow.”

Of course, it wasn't lost on anyone present that Kira was decked out in high-level armour already – its quality reflected in its ornamental gold garnishing – while Jack and Lyle both sported mid-level iron suites. Jack could practically feel the resentment radiating from Lyle's avatar, but new better than to play into her hands. As for himself, Jack couldn't have cared less. His heart hadn't been in Hero's Story for months.

“Next time, just let us handle it,” Lyle grumbled bitterly.

Kira scoffed. “Handling it? Is that what you were doing?”

Before the issue could be pressed any further, Jack spoke up. “Anyways, it's pretty late, and I've got class in the morning. This was true; Jack's heads-up-display told him it was nearly one in the morning. “I'll see you guys tomorrow.”

They all said their goodnights. Before Jack could log out, he saw Kira give him a searching look. Hero's Story's avatars were not perfectly expressive, but Jack knew her expressions, mannerisms, and idiosyncrasies so well that he could fill in the blanks where the game's facial recognition engine fell short. “What aren't you saying?” her look said. Jack returned a look that he hoped read “nothing.”

He logged out.

* * *

“So what exactly is the problem?”

Jack didn't respond right away. His mind was turning over a thousand different responses in his head, trying to find exactly the right thing to say. The problem wasn't that he didn't have an answer, but rather that he had too many to choose from.

“Nothing.”

It came out automatically. He was deflecting, and he knew it. He did it all the time, and he hated himself for it. *Idiot. Who am I trying to fool?* Naturally, the “mmhm” that was Lyle's response was not the “mmhm” of a convinced man.

Jack took another sip of his beer, the icy December air having chilled the bottle pleasantly. He replaced it on the flat-topped iron railing that separated the small balcony from a ten-story drop. He slipped his hand under the blanket draped over his chair. It was made from merino wool, sporting a red and white zig-zag pattern and white tassels. He liked the tassels for some reason he couldn't quite explain. He had never owned a blanket with tassels, and perhaps it made it feel more exotic somehow. He liked to twirl them around his index finger, often reminiscing about the beach near Cairns he had found it on. It was his second-favourite thing that he'd brought home from that beach.

“So maybe things are a little more complicated between us than I thought they would be,” Jack finally relented. Just saying the words felt like having a weight lifted from his shoulders.

“Complicated for the both of you, or just you?” Lyle prodded.

Jack offered an exasperated shrug as a reply, but he could see Lyle wasn't looking at him. His pupils were darting back and forth, like someone reading at a frantic pace. For a few moments, nothing was said, then Lyle let go of a soft but frustrated curse under his breath.

“Dammit Lyle,” Jack said finally, “if you're going to talk to me, would you please actually come out here and talk to me?”

Lyle's eyes refocused on him, and he opened his mouth as though about to speak, but before he could, Jack leaned over and pressed the “disconnect” icon on his pad screen, which was propped up on the lawn chair across from him. Instantly, Lyle disappeared, leaving a black surface so shiny that it perfectly reflected Jack's own face back at him. He saw that he was frowning. He took another sip of his beer.

Looking out over the Montreal skyline, he found himself admiring the thousands of lights that carpeted the city before him. As the moon was hidden by clouds, the veil of darkness that rested atop the city was so dense that the outlines of the buildings were invisible, giving Jack the impression that he was seeing things upside down, with the star-speckled sky down below him and a black, featureless ocean hanging above his head.

Jack's nebulous, half-drunk contemplation was interrupted by Lyle, his heavy, half-stumbling footfalls signalling his entrance onto the balcony. He collapsed into the chair where Jack's pad had rested moments ago, bleary-eyed and yawning.

"You spend too much time in front of your screen," Jack told him without taking his gaze from the cityscape. "You'll fry your optic nerves if you put too much strain on them."

"That's an urban legend – there's no science behind that," retorted Lyle. "Anyways, since you dragged me away from a raid on The Bloodkeep – one in which I feel compelled to mention I was probably going to score some quality loot – the least you can do is buy me a beer."

Jack tapped his node once again, reactivating it. When this was done, the black bottle in his hand lit up with a variety of colourful designs as his visual overlays kicked in. It was a neon mishmash of rotating logos and menu items, nearly covering the entire surface of the bottle. He tapped an option that read "Gimme Another!" in glowing green letters, which then briefly flashed blue, meaning the transaction was approved and his Ucred account would be audited.

"Look," Lyle began, purpose in his voice, "I'm not sure what happened between Kira and you, but clearly this whole 'being friends' thing" – Lyle helpfully provided dramatic air-quotes – "is not working out for you."

Again, Jack could only shrug. He wished he could tell Lyle that he didn't know what he was talking about. Lyle continued. "You need to figure out if you can really see her as a friend. I mean, actually sit down and think about it."

As he finished his lecture, the soft beeping of the delivery drone could be heard, signalling its approach. The small machine came to a stop several feet above Jack's head, its

four miniature helicopter blades gently tickling the hairs on the back of his neck with cold air. A thin, mechanical arm extended down from the cargo bin, on the end of which was another beer. Lyle reached over and snatched it. Before he could pop the cap open, the drone had retracted its appendage and bolted upwards soundlessly into the night.

“You think I haven't been?” questioned Jack. He realized he had been swirling one of the tassels around his fingers again.

Now it was Lyle's turn to shrug. “Fair. But either way, you're going to have to talk to her about it. She can sense something's up with you.”

Jack narrowed his eyes. “What makes you think so? Has she said anything to you?” This came out sounding more desperate than he liked. *Idiot*, he cursed himself again.

Lyle raised his beer in a mock toast before taking a long swig. “Because I noticed. And I don't notice anything,” he said after he had finished.

“Maybe you aren't giving yourself enough credit,” Jack replied.

“Oh, don't get me wrong,” said Lyle, his patented tone of nonchalance taking over, “it's only because I choose not to notice. Frankly, I find your schoolyard relationship drama to be rather dreary.”

He always elevated his diction when he wanted to poke fun. Jack gathered up his blanket into a ball and flung it at Lyle and instantly regretted it.

“Actually, give that back. It's fucking freezing out here,” Jack said.

Lyle took the blanket and covered himself in it. “Sorry, buddy. You've made your own bed, and now you have to sleep in it. Suffer for your callousness.”

Jack made a show of rubbing his arms for warmth. Lyle rolled his eyes and stood, dropping the blanket back into Jack's lap as he walked past.

“Anyways, The Bloodkeep calls. I'm sure you'll figure this mess out,” he said, confidence in his voice.

“Just talk to her,” Lyle advised as he disappeared into the apartment. “What have you got to

lose? It's not like she can dump you again, right?"

* * *

"I think we should get back together."

Jack said it with as much confidence he could muster. *There*. The bandage had been yanked off. The words had been made real now, lingering in the strawberry cider-scented air between them. It felt good to have expelled them, regardless of what the answer would be.

Instead of answering, Kira took another sip of her cider, her expression unchanging. Jack used to think he could read her pretty easily, but he now knew it was only true back in the days she had wanted to be read.

"I know you think that," she said finally.

She looked out of the window, which constituted most of the front wall of the bar. The snow was coming down in big, thick flakes, reflecting the light from the street lamps, bathing Boulevard St. Laurent in a soft, golden hue.

Not receiving the eye contact he had hoped for, he reluctantly turned to follow her gaze.

"I know you know I think that," he said. "So why are we dancing around it, pretending like things are fine?"

"Because there's nothing else to be done. We talked—"

"I know we talked about it," Jack interjected. "But look – if you want to go back home after the spring, I respect that. One hundred percent. But why can't we just be together until then? Make things like they were before, even if just for a little?"

Kira took another sip of her beer – a long, deep one – which Jack took as either stalling for time, or trying to take the edge off in order to make it through this conversation. Probably both.

"Because you'd just be hoping to change my mind – that you'll make me want to stay."

Jack had no ready comeback for this. He knew she had hit the nail on the head, even if it

was something he wasn't keen to admit to himself. He just then realized his hand had found its way to the back of his neck, where he was absentmindedly fingering the node behind his ear.

"I'll always care about you – I think you know that. But giving you hope where there isn't any... I could never be so cruel."

Jack suppressed a humourless laugh. He had lately wondered what Kira was capable of.

"We work better as friends. I thought we agreed," she continued.

For all his anxiety leading up to this conversation, he had always known it was going to end this way. Just a reiteration of things that had been said in the past. Nothing had changed. *Of course nothing has changed, you idiot.* And yet, he felt strangely satisfied in talking it out again. Maybe not satisfied, but pacified at least. He had also known that once the conversation had inevitably gone down this road, he wouldn't press the matter any further. He wouldn't argue or sulk or manipulate. What was the point of pushing her away now when she was going to be stepping onto an airplane in a few short months anyways? It seemed redundant, somehow.

Jack let a little smile tug the corners of his mouth, and to his relief, he knew it to be genuine.

"What's a relationship if not friendship with sex?"

Kira cocked an eyebrow. "So this is about sex, eh?"

A few seconds of silence, then her stony expression cracked, and the two of them laughed together, which felt nice.

"Nice try, mate," she said.

Jack shrugged in the "can't blame a guy for trying" fashion. Kira only ever said "mate" in jest, as she always tried to avoid – sometimes unsuccessfully – cliché Australianisms. Things had been tense between them since the split, so he was happy to get a "mate" out of her for the first time in a long time.

The bar they were at was one of those trendy, loft-style places. Instead of sitting in chairs at a table, the two sat across from each other on a pair of low, cedar green velvet

couches, a vintage chestnut coffee table between them. Kira stood up, walked around the table, and plunked down next to Jack. She patted his thigh in a conciliatory manner, the way a friend comforts another after a heartbreak. “Buck up! Plenty more fish in the sea! You'll land on your feet!” said the pat. He was glad she had the courtesy not to actually say any of these things.

“I don't want to lose you, Jack – you really are my best friend. But if we try to push something that's not there, I'm afraid that's what will happen,” she said softly.

“You're probably right,” admitted Jack.

“When I'm back home, I still expect to see you on Hero's Story every night, you know.”

She looked up at him, and now it was Jack's turn to avoid her eyes. He felt his cheeks getting hot, wilting under her gaze. As if sensing his sudden discomfort, she rested her head on his shoulder, for which he was thankful. Perhaps it would be easier to be “just friends” if he didn't have to see those cobalt blue eyes staring up at him. Kira had modelled her Hero's Story avatar after her own likeness, but the eyes didn't come close to comparing.

CHAPTER 02

Benjamin woke up slowly and peacefully. He didn't emerge from his slumber in one particular instant, but gradually – his senses returning in succession. Just on the other side of sleep, he could make out the gentle sound of lapping waves, threatening to pull him back under.

He felt a set of slender fingers brush across his bare chest, coming to rest on his shoulder. “No dreams?” Amy inquired, her soft breath in his ear sending a pleasant tingle through his body. The question had become a morning ritual.

“None,” he replied, keeping his eyes closed. He thought about not leaving the hammock for the entire day – how pleasant it would be to just lie there, listening to the ocean, feeling the weight of Amy's body against him.

As though having read his, she sprang up from the hammock, rocking it violently.

“Good,” she proclaimed, her voice filled with gusto. “Then you've got no excuse to mope

around all day. Duvan came by earlier, and he wants your help digging a new well up by Jerry.”

She was already moving towards the opposite side of the mezzanine, talking over her shoulder. As she leaned over the stack of old fruit crates that served as their kitchen counter, tin coffee pot in hand, Benjamin couldn't help but admire her figure as the wind rolling in from the beach whipped at her daisy-clad summer dress.

“You were already up?” he questioned, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and rising from the hammock. “How on Earth did you get out of this thing and then back into it without waking me?”

“You sleep like a piece of drift wood these days.”

Benjamin felt the weight of the unsaid behind the comment. *A far cry from how you found me*, he thought. But she had meant it more as a celebration – not as a cold reminder. Maybe a little bit of a boast? They both knew she was the reason he didn't wake up in a panic anymore.

He moved behind her, snaking his arms around her waist. He brought his mouth inches from the back of neck. “You really know how to take care of me,” he whispered in his huskiest voice.

“Mm?” she replied. “Have I ever told you I love your accent?”

“Constantly,” he replied.

“Tell me what you want me to do,” she ordered playfully.

“In The Queen's Tongue? She would be appalled.”

“C'mon. Tell me.”

“Alright,” he said, hovering his lips an inch away from the ear. “I want you to make another cup of coffee.”

“Huh?”

“Because this one's mine.”

He deftly snatched the cup of coffee she had poured for herself before tearing himself away from her. She attempted to turn and shove him, laughing, but he took two long steps

backwards to escape her reach, careful not to spill his prize.

He was about to descend the stairs, but she caught up to him and placed a firm hand on his arm.

“Duvan also said there's going to be a meeting at the hotel later. Wouldn't say why, but that it's probably nothing big,” she told him, a more solemn tone in her words.

Of course, Benjamin knew there wouldn't be a meeting unless it was. He looked back at Amy, framed by the pre-dawn, indigo sky that lay just beyond the bamboo railing before nodding to her. He turned and made his way down the stairs to what was formerly the main dining room of the beach-side restaurant. He downed the coffee in one gulp, grateful Amy didn't make it too hot. He hopped on his ATV, started the engine, and took off through the open back wall and onto the beach, turning towards the direction of Jerry.

“Hey!” shouted Amy from the railing, waving to catch his attention. He jammed the break, kicking up a cloud of sand. He looked up at her.

“Bring back some rope!” she called over the idling engine. “There's going to be a storm tonight!”

CHAPTER 03

Jack had cause to regret many things in his life. His choice of university degree was questionable, his decision to stay in Montreal to battle through a dubious job market was bearing no fruit and, in his current mood, he was even second-guessing his choice of pale blue wallpaper, for some mysterious reason. Maybe a nice burgundy would have been better. And all this was to say nothing of Kira.

But at this particular moment, what Jack regretted most was his decision to set a focus alarm – a chiming noise that would sound in his ear if he began to nod off. Of course, the chiming wasn't a real noise – it was a simulated noise that his node tricked his brain into thinking it was hearing. Jack thought that the chiming must be the most annoying sound to

never exist.

He tapped the big red button on his pad to kill the alarm. Technically, the button hovered an inch above the pad, but his node simulated a haptic response in his parietal lobe, which was satisfying. Not as much as slamming his fist down onto the antique clock radio he had owned before he got his implants, but it was better than nothing. In the days before haptic feedback was integrated into the Neural Network Interface system, using virtual controls had apparently been a nightmare, with NNI users fumbling through virtual menus that were arduous to navigate without a practiced touch. It didn't take long for developers to realize that even though people were eager to jump headfirst into a virtually-enhanced world, they were still hardwired to exist in a physical one. Jack couldn't recall exactly what the science behind it was – something about their mammal brains not yet being evolved past the need for physical feedback. He remembered seeing an old clip that had gone viral of an old man on an early NNI setup trying to select something, but his finger sailed straight through whatever menu he had been looking at and directly into the eye of his wife. Apparently she had been unharmed, so laughs all around. Less joked-about were the Total Immersion setups that had come before, since they had resulted in more than a few deaths.

Once the red button had disappeared, his class notes again hovered above his pad. He was about to begin perusing again when he noticed the time – 8:26 PM. He got up from the couch, taking the final gulp of icy coffee from his mug as he did. He hopped over the low table, which was actually a shipping palette resting on a stack of red bricks. Lyle insisted it was retro-vintage and very chic, while Jack just thought that it looked trashy. Neither of them could afford better, so it would have to suffice. It seemed sturdy enough, at least.

After making his way to his room, Jack opened his room controls on his pad and dimmed his windows. He left the opacity at 90% so that some of the amber streetlight could penetrate into the darkened room, which made it look a little warmer. He sat down in his chair, feeling each of the individual leather cushions conform to his musculature as he leaned back into it. He

reached back behind his ear and popped his pad node out of the socket, which rendered his pad a useless slab of black glass. He plucked another node – his terminal node – from the desk in front of him, and popped it into the socket his pad had previously occupied. To his eyes, the large black screen on his desk came to life, displaying an interface many times more complex than could be laid out on his pad.

Jack navigated the menus by fingering the controls displayed over his armrest, quickly finding the file he sought. The last thing he did before selecting it was to reach over to his desk again, find his old Zippo, and light a stick of vanilla incense that stood half-burnt next to the screen. Many people, Jack included, always came out of a dive with a coppery taste in their mouths – a harmless, but unpleasant side-effect. Kira had given him the tip that burning incense was a sure-fire way to combat this. He didn't know how or why it worked, but she had been right on the money. Now, he never dove without lighting a stick or two first.

When this was done, he opened the file and closed his eyes. Jack could feel the dive commence as his senses were stripped away from him. His dives were always smooth – the implants had taken well with him. The sensation was difficult to describe, but he likened it to falling backwards, like having your chair tipped, only without the floor to greet you. Although the neural recalibration of the dive took only a few seconds in real time, the gentle falling sensation always seemed to last just a little bit longer. He soon felt his missing senses being restored, though all he could see was blackness. He knew the process was complete when he could again feel spatial awareness – a sense of balance – return to him. Then, his vision was filled with fiery, gilded writing that literally exploded from the blackness.

“Welcome to Hero's Story,” it read.

CHAPTER 04

When Jack opened his eyes, he found himself standing on a cobblestone path that sloped downwards before winding to the left on its way down the face of a great mountain. This

afforded him an expansive view of the valley below. Nestled in the forests that blanketed the valley, Jack could see a handful of small villages, mainly by their smoking chimneys and the thatched roofs of their huts. Aside from these tiny specks of human habitation, the vista before him was a picturesque, wild landscape. With its savage rivers, sprawling meadows, and megalithic mountain ranges on all sides, the scene should have evoked a sense of awe – but, for Jack, it didn't. He wasn't exactly sure why that was. Perhaps it was because he had been up and down this valley a hundred times over – waded through every river and scaled every summit. Anything can lose its lustre when ground down by the whetstone of repetition. But then again, he couldn't recall ever feeling awestruck in the way he ought to have, even upon his first ever visit to The Valley of the Skywatch (as it was so called). Even though the NNI system was capable of rendering visuals that were almost photo-realistic, Jack suspected that there was something in the coding that couldn't quite capture the true essence of a place, whatever that happened to be. In the real world, Jack had never seen mountains, or rather, not mountains like this (Mount Royal, a glorified hill that squatted in the center of Montreal, was a mountain in name only). Even so, he had a nagging feeling that something about these mountains should feel more genuine.

High up as he had spawned, it was only a short trek down the path that clung precariously to the mountain face. While all the landscapes in Hero's Story appeared vast and sprawling, everything was more or less a brief walk away from something else. It was some kind of perspective trick the designers had employed to make the scope of the world seem grander. While the average player might enjoy the idea of traversing wild lands to distant castles and dungeons in pursuit of epic quests, few had the time or attention-span to actually do it. So, while the village of Dark Rock appeared as a far-off speck from the mountain pass, he arrived there in ten minutes.

In the lore of the game, Dark Rock was under the curse of the Witch King Obereth, who held court in a labyrinth beneath Mount Skywatch, the summit after which the valley had been

named. The prophecy foretold that the curse could only be lifted once Obereth was defeated by “the destined one.” Of course, because Hero's Story was a MMORPG, every single player was, paradoxically, “the destined one.” In terms of the game itself, the only difference the completion of the Obereth quest made to the town was the way in which the NPC townsfolk addressed a player. After Jack had slain the Witch King early in his Hero's Story career, the variations of “help us, o brave traveler!” the townsfolk moaned as he walked past had switched to variations of “many thanks, o brave traveler!” Strangely enough, Dark Rock was both cursed and not cursed, depending on who was visiting.

Jack had long since tuned out the chorus of praises launched at him as he walked past. He made straight for the Bent Branch Inn, which, though being only two stories, was the tallest building in the village. Inns universally functioned as social hubs where players could meet, trade gear, and organize raiding parties. He found Kira seated at the bar.

Jack made his way across the room, littered with crudely-fashioned wooden tables, seated at which were a handful of other players talking among themselves. Several townsfolk were milling about purely for ornamental purposes. As Jack took the stool next to Kira, she did not seem to register him, but rather continued to stare blankly straight ahead at the collection of filthy bottles lining the wall behind the bar. It looked as if she was studying the murky brown liquid within them, perhaps contemplating whether or not it could be ingested without fear of harm, but Jack knew that her attention was elsewhere. He raised his hand up to her, palm facing out, which prompted the interaction menu. The floating menu appeared at his fingertips, which contained a list of various interactions, such as “Trade Request” and “View Stats.” He selected “Ping.” After a few more seconds, Kira broke from her statue-like trance and turned to face him.

“Sorry,” she said. “I was drawing.”

“Something good?” asked Jack.

“I don't know yet. Just started.”

Jack knew better than to ask if he could see it – Kira was intensely private about her works-in-progress, showing them to only a select few before she unveiled them online. That had been one of the first privileges to go after they decided to be “just friends.” Sex was the second, but Jack suspected they had just become pity-fucks by that point.

“So you wanna hit the mines tonight?” he asked instead.

She shrugged in a way that said “sure.” He was talking about the Fire Mines, so-called because if one journeyed deep enough, they would reach great pools of magma and molten rock. If one acquired said magma, it could be brought to a blacksmith to forge Mythyrian weapons, as magma was the only thing hot enough to melt Mythyrian Steel. As for the question of how one could transport magma back up through the mines, the answer was, as with most questions of video game logic, “don't think about it.” Like everything else, the magma was stored in a player's inventory.

“Should we wait for Lyle?” asked Kira.

“Nah, he's with Charlotte tonight,” Jack replied. “Just us.”

“Bloody girlfriends, always getting in the way of a good adventure,” she joked.

He doubted she was doing it on purpose, but Jack wished she would avoid the topic of girlfriends. She had the habit of blurting out whatever thought popped into her head. Artists.

“I don't know that I would qualify murdering cave goblins for their pocket change as 'a good adventure,'" retorted Jack, which won him a smile. Although he was glad to see it, he despaired at the realization that every conversation they had now needed a new ice-breaker.

They readied their gear and took off towards the forest.

CHAPTER 05

The sun had just begun to crest the horizon by the time Benjamin pulled up to where Duvan was waiting, leaning against Jerry – the colossal statue of Christ overlooking the bay. To Benjamin, Amy, and the other professed atheists – which was to say, most of the other northern ex-pats –

the statue was affectionately known as Jerry. Benjamin knew better than to call it that in front of Duvan though, who was devout in his faith. As such, he expected people to treat Jerry with a certain amount of reverence. Curiously, Duvan himself didn't seem overly-concerned with displaying that same reverence, as he had a habit of putting out his cigarettes on the pedestal on which Jerry stood. Benjamin thought that perhaps Duvan's relationship with the messiah was amicable enough to allow for that level of comfort.

“Hola!” he called out as Benjamin killed the engine of his ATV.

Benjamin returned the wave and hopped off. He paused to look over the town – a collection of squat building nestled into the lush tropical forest, most of which hugged the crescent beach. It was a stunning view, especially with the day's first light bathing the bay in a marigold glow. His and Amy's restaurant was easy to spot, as it was a short ways down the beachfront strip, isolated from the main cluster of buildings. Benjamin always took a moment to take in the scenery whenever he had cause to come up Jerry's tiny mountain.

“You got me out of bed at the crack of dawn to dig a well? It couldn't wait?” Benjamin questioned, but without any bitterness.

“People gotta' drink, man. New family came yesterday,” Duvan informed him before taking a drag from his cigarette.

“Where are they?” Benjamin asked.

He reached for one of the shovels Duvan had brought with the intention of fastening it to the cargo rack of the ATV, but as soon as he wrapped his fingers around the wooden shaft, he felt all the muscles in his body go rigid at the same time. His eyes clenched shut, and Duvan, Jerry, and the bay disappeared from his world. He could perceive nothing, but at the same time, he sensed that there was something tugging at the edge of his thoughts – some dark memory squatting in the periphery of his mind's eye. He tried to focus on it, to drag it into the light and expose it, but he couldn't catch it. He never could. As always, it lingered just beyond his reach. Petulant. Taunting. Though he couldn't see it, he could clearly smell it. He couldn't find a word to

describe the stench, except that it smelled like chemicals. Maybe bleach? He opened his eyes, looking at the shovel in his hand. There was something familiar about it, about the grain of the wood. The way it was weighted. At the same time, Benjamin knew beyond doubt that he had never laid eyes on the beat-up old thing before.

Duvan was saying something, but Benjamin hadn't been listening. He looked up and gathered his wits. "What?" he asked.

"You get a splinter, man?" repeated Duvan, a perplexed look on his face.

Benjamin gathered up the second shovel and dropped them both onto the cargo rack. "Nah, I'm fine," he said as coolly as he could manage, fastening down the shovels with a bungee cord. Duvan seemed skeptical, but let the issue go.

"They at the red house down there."

He pointed his cigarette down towards the base of the hill, on the side opposite of the town. Where the treeline met the beach was nestled a small grouping of luxury mansions that overlooked the Pacific, one of which sported red shale roofing. It seemed poetic to Benjamin that these extravagant abodes were among the last to be claimed, but it didn't surprise him at all. Priorities were different now. The only thing these palaces offered that a typical three-room dwelling didn't was a surplus of empty space, and most didn't have the means to fill it with anything.

"It's better to dig before the storm comes. The ground will be wet tomorrow," continued Duvan.

He propped himself on the rear of the ATV, one leg dangling off the back. Benjamin mounted it once again, but didn't turn the key immediately. He twisted around to look at Duvan.

"Amy told me there's going to be a meeting later on," he said.

"Sí," was Duvan's reply.

He didn't seem concerned, but that didn't count for much. Duvan was the type difficult to rattle, and even if you managed to shake him, he was too proud to let you know it.

“What about? Is it serious? Is it something to do with them?” Benjamin nodded in the direction of the red-roofed house.

Usually when people came, it wasn't cause for any concern. Most of them were just regular people looking to get out of the north. But every so often, some newcomers would elicit the concern of the townsfolk for various reasons, and then a meeting would be held to decide what to do with them. He thought back to his own arrival, which seemed so long ago, though it was only a bit over a year by his best guess. He had caused no small commotion in the sleepy little town.

Duvan simply shrugged, and said nothing. Either he really didn't know anything, or he did and was choosing not to say. Neither thought was comforting. Knowing that further questions would yield nothing, he turned the key, and the two were off down the winding trail.

CHAPTER 06

The road to the mines led Jack and Kira through a deep forest that occupied the heart of The Valley of the Skywatch. What began as a thin smattering of trees soon transformed into a virtual barrier of foliage that lined the dirt road. This made it difficult to spot the Tree Claws – creatures that could be, with some imagination, described as a cross between a gorilla and an armadillo. These strange chimeras enjoyed dropping down from the canopy above when their victims drew close, which inspired Jack to think of them as particularly aggressive coconuts, or Newtonian apples. But rather than inspiring scientific revelations, they served only to inspire annoyance. Jack had plenty of experience sending these beasts to “Tree Claw heaven,” as Kira had once described it. He took care of these assailants by himself, as his daggers were better-suited to close-quarter combat, while Kira's specialization in long bow left her at their mercy.

They had almost reached the entrance of the Fire Mines when they came to Broken Bridge, named thus because that's exactly what it was. On either side of a rushing river that intersected the path were the remains of a covered wooden bridge. It was decrepit, weather-

worn and covered in a thick coat of moss. The middle of the bridge was missing, presumably washed away by the river during a storm. At least, that was the designer's intended implication when they had programmed it.

Kira moved to the edge of the bridge and peered across. "You know," she said slowly, as though puzzling something out in her head, "I reckon I can jump this."

Jack stood beside her and judged the distance for himself. It couldn't have been less than fifteen meters.

"I think you're crazy," he told her earnestly.

It was true that her character, an archer, was one of the more agile classes, and that physics in Hero's Story were greatly exaggerated beyond those of real life, but Jack remained unconvinced.

"I bet you I can," she said, a confident grin splitting her lips. "One pint."

"If you don't make it – which you won't – you'll get washed away. Can't we just take the crossing up-river?"

She turned around and began to walk away from the edge. Jack turned to walk beside her, glad to have convinced her without any argument.

"Jack," Kira said, "how many times have we come down this road?"

"Uh... must be at least thirty be now?" was his response. I haven't exactly been counting, he thought.

"And of those times, how many times have we crossed up-river?" she pressed.

"Every time." Of this, he was certain. "It's the only way to –"

She cut him off by clapping her hand down on his shoulder and said: "if you keep doing the same things over and over again, life's gonna pass you by, mate."

Jack would have made a retort about how clichés said in an accent are still clichés, but before he had time to part his lips, she had turned and began sprinting back towards the bridge's end. Jack could only watch, slack-jawed, as her feet left the rotting boards and began

their flight through the air. Though she was now facing away from him, he knew she was wearing that big, dumb grin that she always had when she was doing something reckless, even if it was in the virtual world. She had a thrill-seeker's heart; it was something he couldn't empathize with, but part of the reason he had fallen for her. He couldn't help but crack a smile of his own.

For an instant, it looked as though her trajectory might carry her clear to the other side, but at the apex of her arc, something unexpected happened. An arm – enormous, muscular, and pale grey – exploded from the churning white of the river below and, with miraculous timing, shot straight up, meeting Kira halfway over the gap. The fingers were large enough that they were able to wrap themselves around her waist, snatching her from midair. Her broken momentum caused her body to jolt like a rag doll before the arm dragged her back down out of Jack's field of view. She let out a yelp of surprise that Jack could barely hear over the muted roar of the rapids.

Acting on pure instinct, he pulled his twin daggers from his belt and began his own sprint to the edge of the bridge. He knew that she was not in any real danger – death in the virtual world equated only to lost time, as were either of them to be killed, they would respawn in the nearest town – but he also knew Kira liked to play with the pain simulation as high as it could go. While the highest setting lessened pain to about half of what might be expected in the real world, Jack imagined that being mauled to death by whatever was on the other side of that arm would still be extremely unpleasant.

Jack did not break his stride to survey the situation below. Instead, he leaped from the edge of the bridge, much like Kira had. It was only mid-flight that he saw where he would be landing, which was squarely on the back of a massive forest troll standing in the river. The water broke violently against the troll's waist, but it seemed unperturbed. It was clutching Kira in its right hand, and judging by the grimace on her face, squeezing the life out of her. Fortunately, it was turned away from Jack, so when he landed blade-first on the back of the troll, it was

understandably surprised. It spun to find its new assailant, but Jack's two daggers were lodged deep between the its shoulder blades, so he stayed pinned. In its bewilderment, the troll let go of Kira, who quickly disappeared into the frothing water below. Jack was relieved to see her bob to the surface seconds later, clearly struggling against the current. In the meantime, the troll bellowed and spun in circles, like a dog chasing its tail as it tried to find Jack. He would have tried to dislodge one of his daggers to stab it again, or at the very least twist it, but he was using all his strength to hold on as the troll trashed wildly. Now that Kira was safe, it crossed his mind that he could simply let go and let the river carry him after her, but he realized that it wasn't often one found oneself in a position to kill a troll. High-level monsters such as this always paid out a boatload of experience points plus, occasionally, some top-tier loot. The job was far from finished, but he already had his daggers firmly planted in its flesh; it seemed like a waste not to seize the opportunity.

Jack used what little strength he had in his reserves to hoist himself up so that his daggers were at the level of his waist. This afforded him the chance to reach the troll's head; he grabbed a handful of its clumpy, matted hair. No longer relying on the daggers to keep him anchored, he was able to yank one loose with his free hand. Fighting against the g-force of the still-spinning troll, he brought the blade up to its throat. He was about to put the angry, confused beast out of its misery when the thing jolted and halted its thrashing. Jack peered over its mammoth shoulder. Where his own blade was inches from slicing through the troll's throat, there was now planted an arrow. As the troll's legs gave out and the two of them began their short journey to the roiling current below, Jack looked up just in time to see Kira perched on a stone jutting up from the river downstream, bow in hand. Then he felt the cold, violent embrace of the water.

Jack found himself being pin-balled about the rocks that littered the riverbed. He desperately scrambled for purchase, but the stone that protruded from the water was so slick from the spray of the torrents that his fingers slid uselessly across them. His NNI connection did

not fail to capture the disorientation of the experience, but at the last possible second, he was able to thrust his hand outward to catch that of Kira's, who still occupied the rock from which she had fired her fatal shot. How she was able to escape the river to mount it unaided was a mystery to him. With some effort on both of their parts, she managed to help him to the shallows, from where they were both able to wade to the bank.

"You stole my kill," he gasped. Though he was, in reality, still lying perfectly still in his room, he had his NNI implants set up to simulate muscle fatigue. He barely felt any pain though, as he, and unlike Kira, preferred to play with pain simulation set to below ten percent. It was not beyond the technology to allow the implants to simulate a full one-hundred percent, but there were laws in place to keep developers from allowing that in their games. Were that not the case, Jack wondered if Kira would play with one-hundred percent pain. She wasn't a masochist, as far as he knew. But then, when they had been making love, he never had had the courage to test her limits. He always thought he had satisfied her, so what was the need?

"I saw Hubert first," she replied, wincing. She was clutching her side, as though she was nursing a broken rib or two.

"Hubert?"

"The troll. I named him Hubert," said Kira matter-of-factly. "Why should only the bosses get real names?"

"When did you have time to think up a name for Hubert? When he was squeezing you to death or when you shot him in the throat?" Jack inquired.

He had managed to hold onto both daggers, and only now had the opportunity to return them to the scabbards strapped to his legs.

Kira simply shrugged.

After collecting themselves, the two took stock of their situation. They had both lost a fair chunk of their HP with their fight against Hubert and the river, but were carrying an ample amount of health potions that they used to replenish their health bars. The trouble came when

Kira revealed that she had suffered an internal injury. There was no way to treat it with potions – the only solution would be to visit a doctor in a village. The result of an internal injury was that it lowered a player's stats until it was treated, while at the same time gradually eating away at their HP. Kira was at such a high level that it made little difference in an area with comparatively low-level foes, such as The Valley of the Skywatch. The problem was that she was clearly in a lot of pain.

“If you would just turn down your pain sims, we could continue no problem,” Jack pointed out as Kira stubbornly began limping back towards the shallows. She waved him off.

“I'll be alright,” she said. “Nothing I can't handle.”

“But why? Why do you insist on putting yourself through this when you can just turn it off?” he protested.

“Because,” she said, turning back to face him, “I want to feel like I'm really here.” She raised her arms theatrically in a gesture that invited him to behold the forest that surrounded him. “I want to feel like Ashira of Atharath. So if Ashira of Atharath's got a busted rib or two, you can bloody bet that I do too.”

She didn't sound annoyed exactly, but her tone implied that Jack should know this by now. He did, of course – he even admired it despite himself – but he didn't get any pleasure from seeing her in pain, even as a result of her own obstinacy. She was a person who wanted to experience everything in life, and didn't seem to understand why others wouldn't. Somehow, this made Jack feel ashamed of his measly ten percent pain simulator.

“Well, will Ashira of Atharath at least have the common sense to see a doctor then?”

“Of course she won't,” Kira declared, her proud smile reappearing.

She resumed her limping towards the riverbank. Jack was powerless to do anything except follow.

They had just crossed the fjord and were about to double back to Broken Bridge when Kira stopped short. Jack, who had begun to look back to the tree canopy to spot the waiting

Tree Claws, nearly walked into her.

“Look, if you have to stop every five seconds—” Jack began, but Kira silenced him with a raised fist, as though they were a pair of soldiers skulking through the underbrush. Jack waited for one tense moment, fingertips teasing the hilts of his daggers, before he dared open his mouth.

“What is it?” he whispered.

He suddenly felt foolish – nearly everything in this forest was far below their level. Hubert had clearly been intentionally inserted to punish anyone for trying to cheat their way across Broken Bridge.

Kira pointed into the trees, though the trunks were packed so densely, Jack couldn't see what she was pointing at.

“What's that?”

She began to creep cautiously forward, and Jack followed suit. As they crept, Jack kept his eyes in the direction that Kira was looking, unsure of what he was searching for, wondering if he would recognize it when he saw it. When he finally did lay eyes on it, there was no doubt in his mind.

There, in a small clearing directly ahead of them, was a tree. They were, of course, surrounded by trees, but this one differed in several key ways. The most obvious was that while the forest was populated with trees sporting traditional brown bark and green leaves, this particular tree was colored, both trunk and foliage, an alabaster white. It contrasted with its drab, shadowy brethren so starkly that it looked as though it was glowing.

When it was obvious that this anomaly posed no obvious danger, they approached it. Entering the clearing, Jack drew close enough to discern the tree's second, more subtle abnormality: it was flickering. Studying it, Jack saw that every few seconds, it would blink out of existence then reappear suddenly. It happened so quickly that if you weren't paying close attention, you might miss it. This happened at irregular intervals, making it seem as though

someone was using it as a telegraph, something Jack had only seen in old war movies.

“What do ya reckon?” asked Kira, clearly just as vexed as Jack. “Part of some quest, maybe?”

Jack pondered this for a few seconds, then shook his head. “Quest-related events only trigger if we have to quest activate. Right now, neither of us have any quests going.”

Kira nodded in agreement.

“It's got to be something important. Maybe if we destroy it, we get some kind of treasure or something.”

She unslung her bow and plucked an arrow from her quiver. Jack could think of no better explanation or course of action, so he simply shrugged and stood to the side. Kira readied her arrow, and as she pulled the string back, a red rune inscribed on the shaft of the arrow began to glow like embers nursed by a breeze. The head of the arrow erupted into a miniature fireball, as though it had been coated in gasoline. She aimed at the trunk of the white tree and released the bowstring with a loud twang. Much to Jack's surprise, the blazing arrow sailed through its target as though it was an apparition. Instead, the arrow impacted the tree directly behind, its trunk exploding into thousands of fiery splinters. The tree then toppled backwards and hit the forest floor with a loud thud.

“It's gotta be some sort of glitch,” concluded Kira, sounding disappointed.

“Maybe...” said Jack thoughtfully. “But when was the last time you saw a glitch in Hero's Story, or even heard about one? They've got a small country's worth of testers working around the clock.”

Kira attempted to touch the tree, but her hand disappeared into it, as if she had dipped into a bowl of milk.

“Gimme a minute,” Jack said. “I'll go scan the message boards to see if anyone else has seen this.”

With an upward flick of his wrist, he brought the game menu up and selected “minimize.”

The strange tree, Kira, and the whole valley vanished from his sight as though he had simply shut his eyes. Even his own avatar was gone, leaving a hovering cursor as the only visible manifestation of Jack. Controlling the cursor with the same neural commands he used to operate his hand, he navigated through a series of windows that his mind perceived as physical objects floating in front of him. In this three-dimensional construct that represented the net, Jack – or rather, his consciousness – was surrounded by an endless sea of windows in all directions, loosely arranged to form a sphere, of which he was the center. Each click caused the windows to reorder themselves around him like an infinitely complex ballet, so that his desired destination was the predominate window in front of him.

While snorkelling in Australia, Jack had once seen a school of fish manoeuvre in perfect harmony in the water. He wasn't sure how they managed it without colliding into each other. He was no stranger to the absurd complexity of the virtual world where the physically impossible was commonplace, but to see it in nature was almost shocking in its beauty. Surfing the net while in deep NNI sometimes made him feel as though he was seeing those fish again, but that was diminished by the knowledge that a simple algorithm was at the heart of this dance.

Jack was just arriving at the Hero's Story message board when Kira pinged him. He selected the small flashing icon in the corner of his vision, which opened a message. It simply read: "!"

He reopened his personal menu and jumped back into the game. Suddenly, he was back in the forest, exactly where he had been standing. Kira was still there, looking as perplexed as ever. Everything was as he had left it, with one glaring exception – the white tree was now missing. In its place, coloured completely white, was a mirror image of Jack's avatar.

CHAPTER 07

Jonathan Ashley leaned back in his chair, causing the ancient wood to groan miserably under his weight. He had been waiting for nearly forty minutes, and his coffee – already stale when

served to him – was cold to his lips. The sound of conversation had been steadily growing since he had sat down as more and more patrons had been claiming the chairs. He observed that no two chairs seemed to be the same make. No doubt the majority of the eclectic furniture had been scavenged from the surrounding lanes. Many of the coffee houses and restaurants in the district lay in ruins, so it was unlikely any of it would be missed. The embattled requisitions bore the scars of their past lives; Ashley's coffee sat upon an elegant, antique Pembroke that had lost one leg, replaced by a pair of scorched milk crates, one stacked upon the other.

Although the spring thaw was upon the city, there lingered a crisp winter chill that wafted through the shattered windows. The city had been rather warm in the late afternoon, so Ashley had left his overcoat in his hotel room. He was beginning to regret this decision. He was considering ordering another coffee in hopes that it would be served warm when Timothy Parker made his way through the large chestnut doors.

At twenty-five, Parker was a nearly two decades Ashley's junior, though appeared to be far older than in the photograph Ashley had been given. *Most likely the beard*, he thought. Apart from that, Parker had a weathered quality about him that was difficult to define. Perhaps he had one too many creases on his forehead, or the white shirt he wore beneath his tobacco tweed waistcoat was a shade darker than it should have been, peppered as it was with ash. A small leather satchel was slung over his shoulder, no bigger than a large book. Ashley guessed it contained the Ensign Selfix 20 that had been loaned to him by the *London Evening Standard* eleven months earlier. But what singled him out as a journalist – which was to say, a foreigner – was not the camera, but rather the way he carried himself. He walked with his head held high, chin out, in a fashion that was uncannily English. The locals were more often seen with their heads tilted down, their shoulders slumped. Ashley could imagine no other way these poor souls should carry themselves – their city had been unhappily caught between the rending jaws of fascism and the greedy, grasping claws of communism, and blood had pooled in the streets as a result. London itself had suffered many months beneath a rain of German buzzbombs. But, of

course, these people were not English. Poor souls.

Ashley saw that Parker spotted him immediately. Clearly surprised at finding another Englishman in the coffee house, he eyed Ashley suspiciously, eyes narrowed. Ashley returned a warm smile and motioned for Parker to join him. He hesitated, but then relented and made his way across the room, sitting across from Ashley.

“Good evening,” Ashley greeted.

“Good evening,” repeated Parker. Then, “I’m sorry – do I know you?”

“I don’t expect so,” Ashley replied, casual and collected. He took a sip of coffee. “Does that surprise you?” he inquired upon noticing the incredulous look Parker was giving him, as though trying to puzzle something out in his head.

“A little, yes,” Parker admitted.

Ashley raised an eyebrow and said, “You know every Englishman in Budapest, then?”

“Just about. Those who exist on paper, in any case. It pays to keep tabs on people in my line of work,” said Parker. Then, more slowly, in a lower voice, “But I suppose you know all about that.”

Ashley smiled in delight. “You’re right on the money. You *are* good.” He extended his hand over the table. “Jonathan Ashley. From the paper.”

The two men shook. “I would introduce myself,” said Parker, “but you undoubtedly already know who I am.”

Ashley tapped the side of his nose twice with his index finger. “Naturally, we’ve been keeping tabs on you. Very impressive work. Your reports never fail to enlighten.” Parker nodded in thanks, though he was still clearly ill at ease. “But business can wait. I presume you haven’t come to the last standing coffee house on this side of the Danube with the intention of keeping your lips dry.” He waived over the waitress. “What will you have? Tea?” Ashley inquired.

“*Kavé*,” Parker told the girl. Ashley didn’t speak Hungarian, but the word for “coffee” was pronounced similarly among most European tongues.

“Good man,” Ashley said. “Tea is a peacetime indulgence. Times like these require something to steel the nerves.” He turned to the waitress and said, “The same for me, please.”

“*Persze*,” said the young girl in a sweetly meek voice before turning and leaving the two.

“Germany's surrendered,” Parker said. “They say Hitler's killed himself. That, or he's been captured and is rotting in some God-forsaken NKVD basement by now. Although, you surely know more about that than I do. In any case, it's peace time now, is it not?”

At this, Ashley let out a wry chuckle. Before he could reply properly, the waitress had returned with a pair of mugs. She set them down in front of the two men, causing the table to wobble in protest on its makeshift leg.

Ashley nodded thanks to the waitress. He produced a pair of one-thousand pengo notes and held them out. Now it was Parker's turned to chuckle. He pulled a small carton of Eckstein cigarettes and handed it to the waitress, who accepted them graciously before taking her leave.

“That will pay for your first coffee as well. You should have left your pengos at home,” explained Parker. “Some establishments will take pounds and dollars, and others will take rubles. You might call it speculation. They all accept cigarettes, though.”

Ashley smiled in gratitude. He took his black leather suitcase from beside his chair and laid it flat on the table. He popped the clasps, opened the lid wide enough to fish out a small bottle of Armagnac and offered it to Parker.

“No thank you,” Parker said. Although he seemed composed, Ashley could tell he was still uncomfortable. He detected a hint of Norfolk tugging at the edge of Parker's well-practiced Oxford accent.

“As you wish,” said Ashley with a slight shrug. He deftly uncorked the bottle and liberally poured the tawny liquid into his own mug. At the same time, he nudged a small copper pot of sugar across the table, with which Parker proceeded to flavour his coffee.

After they both sipped their respective drinks, Ashley folded his hands on the table.

“Let's get to it, shall we?” he said.

CHAPTER 08

By the time Jack stepped off the escalator, Lyle and Kira were already standing by the baffle gates. They were waiting off to the side, allowing the stream of commuters coming up from the tunnel to pass by. He was surprised to see someone else standing with them – a girl. Monday was the one day that Jack and Kira's classes – and Lyle's daytime shift at the bar – ended at the same time, so it had become their tradition to have coffee afterwards. This was the first time that it wasn't just Lyle and Kira waiting.

The first thing that struck Jack was the mocha coloured locks that tumbled out from the back of the girl's tuque all the way to her waist. Her back was turned to him, but her animated hands indicated she was the one talking. Both Lyle and Kira seemed to be listening intently.

In Jack's eyes, Kira was composed of three distinct people: Kira the artist, Kira the geek, and Kira the Australian. Unlike her other two personas, Kira the Australian was friendly to the point of approaching total strangers – which was to say, too friendly. Jack wondered if this brown-haired girl might be one of her victims.

He manoeuvred through the throngs as he approached the trio. Once he was next to them, his two friends nodded their greetings and smiled, but it was the stranger who moved to allow him space in the circle. She extended her hand, a sunny grin on her face. Now he could see her clearly, he noted that she had wide hazel eyes beneath a pair of red-rimmed glasses. She was as tall as Jack and, though hidden beneath a knee-length winter coat, her broad shoulders gave the impression of athleticism.

“Hello,” she said. It came out closer to “allo”, instantly identifying her as a francophone. “My name's Béatrice.”

Jack took her hand. “Jack,” he replied.

“I know,” she told him, still smiling. At his raised eyebrows, she quickly added, “I mean, your friends told me about you.”

“I see,” Jack said, shooting inquisitive looks at both Kira and Lyle. Before he could ask the obvious question, Kira jumped in.

“Bee's in my digital sculpture class,” she supplied.

“Oh,” said Jack. “My pleasure.”

“Kira was just telling us about your weird tree thingy,” said Lyle. “Or whatever it was.”

“Just some weird glitch,” Jack said dismissively. “No big deal.”

After the tree had transformed into a copy of Jack, it tried Kira on for size. Then, back to a tree, then Kira again, then Jack, and finally, back into a tree, never once losing its opal hue. It likely would have continued to mimic the two of them, but they had grown bored and eventually logged out. More accurately, Jack had grown bored, and Kira had begrudgingly conceded there was nothing more to be done with the strange tree. Before they had logged off, she had named it Lily.

Jack turned to walk, and the others followed suite. They each took turns passing through the baffle gates, the interlocking teeth sliding open as the system detected their NNIs and confirmed their IDs.

“Like nothing I've ever heard of,” said Béatrice excitedly.

“You play?” Jack asked, but only as a matter of form – it was obvious that she did.

“I met Kira online before we found out we were in the same class,” she smiled at Kira, but Kira did not reciprocate.

They had arrived at the platform where a crowd of people, mostly other university students like themselves, stood waiting. Just then, the mag-train glided up soundlessly to the platform and opened its doors, allowing a cascade of passengers to disembark. The four boarded the train and occupied the corner closest to the door. The train featured panoramic windows along its length that were so tall, they arched over their heads, nearly meeting at the apex of the cylindrical car. Displayed on the window closest to them was not only their current stop and the next, but a full map of the metro system. The blinking red dot designated the train's

current location, while a red line traced a route to Sherbrooke station, indicating the optimal route to get to their customary coffee spot. Of course, Jack already knew the way by heart, but his personal cloud was programmed with his entire schedule, which his NNI duly kept him aware of with every public screen it could grab. He had to admit that, without his schedule keeping him on track, he would drift into procrastination and get nothing done. It wasn't unusual, though; –he was sure most people on the train saw their own unique destinations painted on the glass.

“I'm a level eighty-three knight,” Béatrice continued.

She began to list off the skills she specialized in and the rare equipment she had collected. Clearly, she was a Hero's Story fanatic. Jack nodded and smiled politely, but his investment in the game had always been tied to Kira. He wondered if his heart had ever been in it, even at the beginning. He had become a powerful rogue and an expert at the game during the past few months, but it was more of a by-product of their relationship. Before she had decided to begin a semester of exchange in Montreal at the conclusion of Jack's in Australia, he had never played once. Lyle showed a more sincere interest in Béatrice's rambling, while Kira just stared out the window. She was one of the few people Jack knew who didn't use the cloud schedule; he wondered what overlays she was looking at instead, if any.

After a few stops, the train pulled up to Berri-Uquam, one of the system's central hubs, connecting several lines. As the doors slid open, Kira finally spoke up.

“No coffee for me today,” she announced.

“But today's Monday,” Lyle told her, mock-hurt in his tone.

“I'm sure you boys will have fun without us,” she said.

While Béatrice had yammered away, Kira had been uncharacteristically silent. Now that she was speaking, Jack sensed something off in her voice, although he couldn't quite place it. Béatrice leaned forward towards Lyle to perform the double cheek kiss customary among the French, but Kira hastily snatched her wrist and yanked her along as she exited. Caught off

balance, Béatrice still had the wherewithal to give a wave back in Jack and Lyle's direction as Kira led her quickly through the doors like an exasperated parent corralling an unruly child. Jack waved back, more-so at Kira than at Béatrice, but she never turned back to see it.

“Hm,” said Lyle, clearly as perplexed about the situation as Jack was.

“Hm,” agreed Jack.

CHAPTER 09

Jack took a long drag from his joint, letting the smoke linger in his frigid lungs for a moment just to warm them up. He looked out over the skyline – the finer details of the metropolis obscured by fat snowflakes tumbling ceaselessly from the clouds above. The sun was buried deep in the overcast sky this afternoon, so the sunset was a gradual shift from a pale grey to a darker grey. Normally, the city would appear as a maze of lights, with glowing ads and shop signs running through the streets like neon veins. Stretching skywards, the skyscrapers served as canvases for colourful mosaics that rearranged themselves hypnotically, as if being seen through a monolithic kaleidoscope. But when Jack came out onto the balcony to clear his mind, he liked to turn his NNI off, robbing the city of its gaudy ornamentation, leaving just office windows and streetlights to break up the jumble of cold, ashy concrete. Jack imagined Montreal must have looked like this to everyone only a few decades ago.

Jack tried to make his mind wander in any direction except that of Kira, and found himself thinking of the white tree. Lily, he mused to himself. He supposed the tree's color had inspired the name. Naturally, as soon as he started to think about the tree, he started to think of Kira as well. He hadn't heard from her since the metro ride on Monday, and he briefly considered messaging her. He then inwardly scolded himself and tried to occupy his mind with something else – his school work, hockey trade rumours, what he would do on the weekend – anything else. And yet, there it was, looming curiously in his mind. To distract himself, he considered turning on his NNI to watch some streams on his pad, but his joint fizzled out in the

chilly air, and rather than light it up again, he took it as an excuse to flick it over the edge of the balcony and go back inside.

The door to Lyle's room was closed, and the extra pair of boots by the main door told him Charlotte had arrived while Jack had been outside. The suspicious absence of any kind of noise told Jack that Lyle likely had his room's sound-dampeners set to maximum, which meant he wouldn't have any company from them any time soon.

He went to the tiny alcove that served as the kitchen and open the freezer. He pulled one of the cube-shaped containers from the rack that lined the freezer wall. He then slid the container – which contained a chunk of frozen ham – into the waiting tray of the oven, which automatically withdrew it from sight. It wasn't quite supper hour yet, but he was bored. He had always been a boredom-eater, and it had showed before he forced himself to get a gym membership. The oven's screen lit up, and with a few finger-swipes, he arrived at [goodeats.ca](#), which was first in his favorites folder titled “Meals.”

They updated their menu every Thursday, so he was happy to see a list of new dishes to choose from. After some browsing, he chose a recipe called “Autumn Spice Glazed Ham,” which instructed him to insert two green and one orange ingredients packs, all of which he had in the cupboard above the sink. He observed that they were running low on both orange and blue and quickly created a reminder on his pad to pick some up from the store. His personal cloud would work out the most optimal time for that in his schedule. Always having to replenish ingredient packs and food containers was a tedious and archaic way to cook, but they didn't have the credit to purchase a more modern drone-linked oven. He plugged the packs into the stove, which began to emit a chorus of clicks and whirs, which meant the preparation process had begun.

Sadly, dinner was not an immediate cure for boredom, as it would take exactly twenty-two minutes for the ham to cook. He milled about the living room for a few minutes, scrolling through his Friendbox feed. As nothing interesting was going on there, he made his way to his

room. He hesitated, sighed, then sat in his chair, switching his implants as he did. Aside from Monday, when Kira had abandoned them for Béatrice, Jack couldn't remember the last time he had played Hero's Story without her; she had been the reason he had started, and was still the reason he continued. He knew he wouldn't find her online, as she always worked at the hotel on Thursday evenings. Jack, however, couldn't think of a better way to spend the next nineteen minutes. Also, if he was being honest with himself, the white tree was still on his mind. He didn't know why exactly, but he felt like he had to see it again.

* * *

Jack's first surprise upon entering the game came in the form of a tiny number one that was displayed in the periphery of his vision. The number, which corresponded to the number of friends on his friend list currently online, could only mean one thing: Kira was playing. Aside from Lyle, who he knew was preoccupied at the moment, she was the only other name on his list. He accessed it, and, as expected, saw the name "Ashira of Atharath." Next to it was written "The Valley of the Skywatch": her location. This did not come as a surprise.

Had she quit her job? Why hadn't she invited him to play, as she usually did when she logged on? Although curious, Jack decided not to announce his presence. She wouldn't have been alerted to him signing on, as she always played without her HUD activated (it ruined the immersion, according to her). Instead, he wanted to see what she was up to for himself. While there was no way to locate a player within a general area – to prevent head-hunting – Jack knew exactly where he would find her.

It didn't take long for Jack to rediscover the clearing where the white tree had stood. This time, however, it was not present. Rather, the clearing was populated by a trio of avatars – none of which were uniformly white. The one closest to Jack, who kept his distance behind the treeline, was unmistakably Kira. Even though she was facing away from him, her ebony bow fitted with diamond nocks was an incredibly rare item; one didn't see it often. Her hood, which hid the back of her head, was decorated with a red pattern of her own design. The character to

her left was a sorceress, covered in a silver robe and holding a twisted tree-branch staff like a walking cane. She sported blonde hair that was tied into a braid so long that it looped around her neck like a chain of gold.

The third character was the peculiar one. Like the other two, it was a female avatar. However, she didn't wield any weapons or wear any accoutrements specific to her class, rendering her a mystery. Instead, she wore a burgundy tunic and brown cowhide pants, which Jack recognized as clothes provided to new players upon entering Hero's Story for the first time. Of course, players always went through the standard tutorial in the town of Black Gate, which was in a completely different part of the world. They were confined to Black Gate and the surrounding swamps until they reached a certain level, which then allowed them to travel the wider world. At that point, players at least had set of basic armor and weapons. Why someone would be unarmed out here was a mystery to Jack. This character wore her hair short and unkempt, and it was coloured white.

Jack tried to hear what three of them were saying, but he was too far away. As a rogue, he was equipped with a skill called "Enhanced Senses," which allowed him to increase the distance at which he could eavesdrop, but he had never allotted any skill points to it, so it was effectively useless. Realizing that his surreptitious ways would get him nowhere, he sighed in defeat, emerged from the treeline, and walked towards the three avatars. The sorceress was the first to notice him. She raised her staff and mouthed something to Kira, who spun around and unslung her bow in one fluid motion. Her hand instinctively shot up to pluck an arrow from her quiver, but stopped halfway when she saw who it was.

"Jack!" she said with an expression that conveyed a mix of surprise and relief. "What in the world are you doing here?"

She lowered her bow. The sorceress did likewise. The white-haired girl was watching him as well, but she didn't seem phased by the intruder. Her expression was unreadable.

"Most likely the same thing you are," he replied as he joined them. "Though I didn't bring

entourage.” He looked at Kira's two companions pointedly.

The sorceress looked nervous, and shot a questioning look to Kira, like a confused child desperately seeking instruction. There was a moment of awkward silence before Kira, apparently having decided something, rolled her eyes, let out an annoyed sigh, and nodded to the sorceress.

“You've met Béatrice ,” she said.

At this, Béatrice 's expression relaxed slightly. “Hello,” she said.

Unlike Kira, whose avatar was modeled after her own likeness, Béatrice 's sorceress bore only a passing resemblance to her real-life counterpart. Though Jack had only met her the one time, he recalled that she had rounder cheeks and wider eyes, and was a bit shorter.

Jack nodded then turned his gaze expectantly to the third player. She didn't say anything.

“And you are...” prompted Jack, a little more rudely than he'd meant to. Kira was clearly annoyed at having been discovered here, which annoyed Jack in turn. Why was it such a big deal if she wanted to play with someone else? What did he care? What she did was none of his business.

For a few seconds, the girl did not seem to even register that she was being addressed, though she continued to stare blankly at him. Then, just as Jack was about to open his mouth again, her expression changed to – what? She was smiling, but there was something in it he couldn't place. Recognition, perhaps? The look of spotting an old acquaintance on the other side of a busy street? Even if that was it, it was still off. The girl waved at him, smiling a crooked kind of smile.

“Um... Jack?” said Kira cautiously. He turned to her, his eyebrow cocked in confusions. “You've met her, too.” She looked at the white-haired girl, and in a voice one would use to encourage a toddler, said, “Say hi to Jack, Lily.”

“Hi to Jack, Lily,” echoed the girl.

CHAPTER 10

Timothy Parker held his mug an inch above the table, his fingers gripping the rim like a spider. He rocked it in a circular motion, turning the black coffee into a swirling vortex. He was staring hard at Jonathan Ashley, who sat back comfortably in his chair.

“You still haven't answered my question,” he said.

“About the war?” inquired Ashley.

“No. About you. Why have you come to Budapest?”

Ashley set his coffee down and folded his hands in front of him. “To find you, of course,” he said.

“I have little doubt of that. How did you know I would be here tonight?”

Parker's expression didn't change as he continued to eye Ashley, no doubt trying to read him. Men of their profession were particularly good at that. They had to be.

“An English journalist isn't terribly hard to find in this city, you know. It looks as though the Red Army means to keep the territory it's won from Hitler, and those unwilling to take up the proletariat's struggle are fleeing back west. You might consider doing the same before long.”

“I'm still on assignment, as you well know. Besides, I have valid papers. I'm free to leave at any time,” Parker said, almost defensively.

“Of course, of course,” conceded Ashley, raising his palms in mock-surrender. “In any case, I've come to take you back to London. You're to be reassigned.”

The words appeared to hit Parker like a train. He almost winced, which Ashley would have missed had he not been studying Parker's face intently. Parker nodded slowly, gazing blankly into the middle-distance. Ashley could practically see the cogs in his head whirring away, considering the ramifications. The implications. What Ashley was really saying to him. He had faith that Parker had already pieced the puzzle together. He may be young, but he was sharp, Ashley knew. Work like theirs required a certain amount of intuition. That's why Parker had been

plucked from a middling clerical job some three years earlier.

“You could have just sent a telegram,” Parker pointed out. Something in his voice had changed, though Ashley couldn't quite put his finger on it.

“I may be old, but I do still like to get my feet wet from time to time,” he told him. “Soon they'll have me permanently affixed to a desk back in London. Where's the fun in that?”

Parker hazarded a quick glance around the coffee-house before returning his eyes to Ashley. It wasn't a nervous glance – he had been looking for something. Friends of Ashley's, no doubt. Whereas before the man had seemed nervous, he appeared collected now. Was it resignation? *No*, thought Ashley. *Not quite*. A loud hammer-fall signalled the beginning of what Ashley assumed to be the nightly ritual of boarding up the coffee house's windows, probably to protect from the night's cold, but also from the looters that still prowled the alleys under the cover of dark. At the first crack of hammer finding nail, Parker did not flinch. Acceptance followed by cold focus. Parker, Ashley realized, did not intend on being the nail.

“Perhaps it would be wise to speak somewhere more quiet,” suggested Parker, rising from his seat. Ashley did not reciprocate, but instead motioned to the freshly-vacated chair. “Please,” he implored, “let's finish our drinks. Waste not, want not.”

He had phrased it as a request, but Ashley knew Parker was smart enough to recognize it for what it was: a command. Parker hesitated, glanced towards the door, and then relented, retaking his seat. As Parker settled back down, Ashley noted that one hand remained beneath the table, while the other clasped the handle of his mug.

“The fact is, I haven't got a clue what's going to happen to you once we get back to London. Before the bureaucratic machine gets a hold of you, I'd like to have a chat. Man to man.”

“If we must,” sighed Parker. “Don't you think it would be more prudent to talk in private?” Ashley waved him off. “You worry too much. No one here is listening.”

He was more or less certain of this.

There was a tense silence as the two sipped their drinks. Even as Parker's mug was raised to his lips, Ashley saw that the man's eyes never left him.

"How did you find me out? Where did I slip up?" asked Parker.

"Oh, you didn't," Ashley reassured him. "One of our double agents gave us your name. Your new friends sold you out, boy."

At this, Parker simply shrugged. He looked bleakly into his coffee, his shoulders sagged. "*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,*" he mused in a soft, unhappy voice, as if to himself, "*creeps in this petty pace from day to day.*"

Ashley leaned forward so that only Parker could hear him, and in a low hiss, said, "Don't you dare quote Shakespeare to me, you little shit. You ought to be quoting Dostoevsky, you bloody traitor."

Parker appeared taken aback by the sudden outburst, but his features quickly relaxed into a smile.

"A king's man to the last," he said, amused. "I don't know what they'll say about me in the papers once I've been locked away – what they'll make me say to avoid the firing squad, but I want you to know, Ashley, I never gave them any usable intelligence, nor have I killed an Englishman."

Ashley sat back in his chair, his brow furrowed. "But you've killed GRU operatives."

"Yes. Two. On London's orders," Parker pointed out.

"So why would the Soviets give asylum to an SIS agent who can't give them anything? One with Russian blood on his hands, no less? We know you're meant to leave for Moscow for tomorrow. No, I'd wager you've spilled your guts to them, and now that you've bought your ticket, it's time to punch it."

Ashley was staring hard at Parker, trying to penetrate – to learn his secrets. It was true they'd got his name from a double, but the double hadn't been able to tell the SIS any details of what Parker had been up to – just that he'd been in contact with a local GRU spy ring. A few

days earlier, they had intercepted a Soviet wireless calling Candle – the code name the double had attributed to Parker – to Moscow. This would have taken place tomorrow.

“How long have you called Stalin 'Master'? You certainly weren't a bloody communist when we found you, that's for certain. We'd have sniffed it out,” Ashley spat.

He felt his face getting warm, and he forced himself to take a long breath. *Relax*, he commanded himself. Parker had been right on the money – Ashley was a king's man at heart. All the horror and slaughter he'd seen had never once shaken his faith in God and country, and he had seen more than most. That's why he hated traitors – how could men be so weak? Timothy Parker hadn't been tested the way he had, so what excuse could he have to so readily abandon England?

Parker gave a weary smile. “Why can't you simply leave me be? I've done your dirty work. I've cut the throat of a man in a public bath, and dashed the skull of another on his own bedpost. Now the war's over – I simply want to go where I wish to go and be left alone. Surely I've earned at least that?”

“That's the second time you've claimed that the war is over, but you can't really be so naive, can you?” retorted Ashley. “Germany may be defeated, but the war with Russia has only just begun. Hitler's fall has been academic for the better part of two years now – who do you think we've really been fighting in the interim? This isn't peacetime, Timothy, and if you aren't with the Crown, you're against the Crown. And it seems you are most certainly not with the Crown.”

Now it was Parker's turn to laugh. “The Crown, the Party, the Nazis – they're all just blades on a waterwheel that will keep on turning as long as there's a river to turn it. Some on top, and others on the bottom, drowning.” Parker was becoming more animated now, but remained composed enough not to draw attention. “You've killed us all, you old men. Can't you see that? Those of us you haven't sacrificed in your fight with fascism, you mean to sacrifice in your fight with communism.”

Ashley just continued to stare, saying nothing. Parker continued.

“Often I wonder if it's because your generation is bitter about being killed in the last war. But you can't revenge yourselves on your fathers because they're already dead, so you devise ways to kill your sons instead. Then, eventually, what's left of us will contrive our own clash of ideals out of spite, and the wheel will keep on turning. It's all an infernal whirligig. There is so much more happening that you can't see. If you knew what I knew, you'd see it for what it is: a waste a time and life. A distraction.”

There was a long silence between the two. At this point, nearly every seat in the room was occupied by men covered in ash and dirt, eager to rest after the weary labour of rebuilding their ravaged city. There was no laughter or raised voices, however – conversations were held in sombre tones. The fighting in the streets might have been over, but they sensed what Ashley and his folk in Section 6 were already keenly aware of – the future of Europe was not optimistic. But the room was large, and there were enough people so that their voices, hushed as they were, combined to form a steady, muted din. It was hardly possible that anyone except the two men could hear the *click* from under their table.

“Frankly, the reasons for your actions don't mean anything to me,” Ashley said. “I'm interested in facts. That's what makes me good at my job, Timothy. I don't let rhetoric cloud my judgment. And right here, right now, these are the facts: you're in contact with the Soviets, and we don't know what you've given them. So as far as we're concerned, you've been compromised. There's nothing you can say that will change my mind, or the minds of my superiors. You've broken the sacred bond of trust between us.”

Parker leaned forward, but kept his right hand beneath the table. “Fine, if you want to talk about facts, then it's my turn to share one with you: I'm not going back to London. As you say, there's nothing I can say that will make you trust me. There's so much more at stake than you know, old man. You think you see everything, but you see nothing at all. But if there's anything on God's green earth you do believe, believe this: I am not going back to London.”

For the first time, Ashley heard true steel in his voice. The pretense between them had faded away like morning fog, and in the sunlight, Ashley saw a man who would not submit to him. He felt the gun-barrel press into his lower abdomen.

Ashley sighed. "You're right," he told Parker. "You aren't going back to London."

Parker raised his eyebrows in surprise, as though he had already convinced himself that the only way he was leaving the coffee-house not in Ashley's custody would be to shoot him.

"You never were going back to London, Timothy. As I said, you've been compromised, so there's nothing useful you can tell us. The only useful thing left for you to do is die."

This caused Parker to press the barrel of his pistol harder into Ashley. He had heard Parker cock the hammer, which meant he was one twitch away from a bullet in the stomach. This was made all the more distressing by the fact that Parker's hand had begun to tremble. As anyone trained in firearms knew, a gunshot wound to the stomach was a hideous way to go. *I'd rather be shot in the head*, Ashley thought. Still, he managed to keep his composure.

"I plan to live a little while longer," Parker said. "I still have important work yet to do." The quaking of his hand was beginning to spread, and now he was talking through chattering teeth, although he didn't seem to realize.

"To be frank, I'm surprised you're not dead already," Ashley said. He glanced at his wrist watch, which read 6:49. "Thirteen minutes. They told me ten minutes was—" he began, but was interrupted by a sudden, violent cough that erupted from Parker's throat. Although caught by surprise, Ashley's hands instinctively shot under the table, wrapped around the frame of the pistol, wrenched it to one side and pulled it from Parker's hand. It came away easily, as Parker's fingers seemed unable to grasp it any longer. It was only after the pistol had been safely confiscated that Ashley realized how lucky he was that the cough had not caused Parker to accidentally squeeze the trigger. For his part, Parker seemed uninterested in the gun. He brought his hands to the base of his throat, but didn't quite know what to do with them. He coughed again, this time louder. Ashley felt a drop of spittle hit his cheek. Then he saw that

Parker's lips were a deep shade of crimson, he knew it wasn't spittle at all.

Parker continued to cough nearly as violently as he was shaking. He got to his feet, knocking over the Pembroke, spilling the coffee. He tried to walk – Ashley didn't think he had enough sense left to know where he was going – but caught his foot on the leg of a rust-coloured oaken table and staggered. Instead of instinctively righting himself, he swayed to the left and then weakly crumpled forward onto the table, knocking over a set of teacups. He began to convulse uncontrollably, muscles seizing up, locking him into a contorted pose. Ashley had once walked through an alley of Whitechapel that had been bombed the previous night. A Punch and Judy street booth had been destroyed, and the marionettes were strewn haphazardly among the rubble in unnatural positions. Parker looked very much like one of those marionettes now.

A gurgling noise erupted from the man's throat. The corners of his mouth were dotted with phlegm, mixed with the blood. The two women at the table cried out in horror and bolted upright, stumbling backwards.

“My God!” cried Ashley, “I think this man's having a stroke!” He tucked the pistol into the waist of his trousers as he stood.

The other patrons formed a circle around Parker, whose eyes were already becoming cloudy. No one dared touch him. They had probably guessed there was nothing to be done for the poor man. There was concern in their faces, but aside from the two women who had been taken by surprise, no horror. These people had seen too much death.

Of course, it was always going to end this way. There was never a deal on the table, no interrogations to be had. Ashley had put forward the idea of having Parker double for them, but there was always a chance that if let loose, Parker might report back to his handler that Britain had its fingers in Russian operations in Hungary. This was something his superiors were unwilling to risk. Extracting a captive Parker was deemed an operation too sensitive for its potential payoff, so the decision was made to simply have him removed from the game board.

And so, Parker's fate was sealed the moment he added sugar to his coffee. Naturally, if that hadn't worked, Ashley had a dozen carefully-selected, equally discreet redundancies contained in his black suitcase. Failing all of those, he could have led Parker into the back alley and done it in the old way. Mercifully, it hadn't come to that.

With all of the attention on the quickly-fading Parker, Ashley subtly slipped away from the crowd and began to make his way to the door. Once outside, he found the night's air to be rather refreshing, and put him in better spirits. Not that he was bothered by killing. He had seen much death in his life. His relationship with it had commenced in Belgium.

Belgium.

Before Belgium, he didn't know the difference between the right kind of death and the wrong kind of death. He hadn't even known there was a wrong kind until it had been laid out gloriously before him. Even poor Parker, likely choking to death on his own vomit at that very moment, didn't realize how good he had it. He looked over to his left where the Danube intersected the ruined city. Beyond the guard railing lay the wreckage of the Erzsébet Bridge, its support piers rising up from the black water, bearing no load. The ice had begun to melt, and the bodies trapped within began to congregate against the base of the piers. From where he stood, Ashley couldn't make out which of them had been soldiers.

Belgium.

He clenched his eyes shut as hard as he could, trying to fend off the memories threatening to creep into his mind. *Focus on the task at hand. Focus on the task at hand*, he repeated to himself over and over again, like a mantra. *The contact. The contact.* He longed for the unopened bottle of Monfortino that waited on the nightstand of his hotel room – the hard stuff was always a stalwart tree to hide under when the storm of his memories darkened the sky. It would have to wait, though, as there was still work that needed to be done.

The contact.

CHAPTER 11

“She’s a hacker,” Jack said, as though stating something completely obvious, which – as far as he was concerned – he was. He was walking briskly, kicking clumps of snow aside with each stride. It had snowed again the night before, and in the boroughs that surrounded Downtown, the snow-drones never seemed to be deployed with the same urgency as they were in the city proper. However, they’d been having an unseasonably warm winter thus far, so the snow was wet and loose, doing little to slow them down.

“I don’t think she is,” countered Kira, shuffling along beside him, a cigarette hanging from her mouth.

“What could possibly make you think that?” he inquired.

Kira hesitated before she responded. “It’s just a feeling, I guess.”

Jack rolled his eyes, even though he knew Kira couldn’t see. “C’mon, how gullible can you be? She’s obviously messing with you. I can’t believe it’s even a question.”

“But if she was a hacker,” piped up Béatrice from behind them, “why would she be acting that way? If it’s a joke, I don’t get it. It’s too random.”

The previous night had seen Jack doing his best to try and catch the hacker in the act, trying to get her to slip up. Lily had continued to act strangely, answering most of his questions by parroting them back at him. From time to time, she seemed to lose interest and would perform some peculiar action, like walking in circles or staring at the sky. It was like trying to interrogate a two-year-old, and it didn’t take long for Jack to lose patience and sign out.

“Who cares?” spat Jack. “Whoever she is – if it really is a she – she’s wasting our time. She was messing with us when we found her, and she’s wasting it now. The more you allow her to fuck with you, the more she will. That’s how people like that work.”

Neither of the two women had a response to this. He couldn’t tell if he was more annoyed with the hacker or with Kira for falling for it. He didn’t know Béatrice very well, but frankly, he expected better from Kira. She might be a thick-headed, naive, overly-optimistic

romantic, but she wasn't an idiot.

The three of them were coming up on the corner of Monkland Avenue, which mercifully had a Starbucks kiosk on the corner. Jack liberated his pad from his pocket and opened up the Starbucks server. The screen displayed their location on an overhead map, and he selected the nearby kiosk. A menu opened up, and Jack picked out a simple black coffee with two sugars.

“Not to mention you skipped work,” Jack added.

After another few seconds of silence, Kira finally spoke. “See,” she said, “this is why I didn't mention anything to you. I knew you would react like this.”

She sounded exasperated, but there was also a tone of melancholy present.

“Logically?” offered Jack.

“Cynically,” she corrected. “Look, you haven't been there with us. Each time Bee and I see her, she gets a little...” Kira paused, looking for a word, “smarter.”

“What do you mean, 'smarter'?” Jack pressed.

“When we first found her, all she could do was either appear as a tree, or copy one of us,” reminded Kira. “But when Bee and I went back the next night, she had figured out how to move around. She was just gliding around without moving her legs, but we taught her how to walk. She learned by watching us do it.”

They reached the corner of the street. Jack had to dart behind the Starbucks kiosk to avoid a miniature tsunami of slush sent up by a passing car. The tall green box shielded him from the worst of it, but a cold wetness on his ankle told him he hadn't been fast enough. He had to grit his teeth to stop himself from shouting after the asshole. Sensing his NNI, the kiosk opened its small sliding door and extended a retractable arm that held a steaming paper cup at the end. Jack snatched the cup and took a hearty swig of the bitter liquid, as though in protest against winter itself and all the damp pant legs that came with it.

“And then, it wasn't long before she started speaking,” Béatrice continued. “She was just repeating what we said in the beginning—”

“Hold up,” interrupted Jack. “You guys are talking like you're raising a child. If she knows how to sign on to Hero's Story, I think she – if it even is a she, mind you – probably knows how to talk.” He was finding it hard to keep the condescension out of his tone.

“Well...” began Béatrice meekly, “we were thinking that maybe it's possible that –”

“I don't think she's an actual person,” stated Kira firmly. She plucked the cigarette from her mouth and clicked the small button on the side, allowing the spent nicotine pack to drop from the tip. It fell into the snow below with a quiet hiss.

“So it's just a glitchy NPC?” Jack asked, curiosity beginning to edge out his combativeness.

“I don't think it's that either,” she answered. “Like I said, it's as if she's learning. NPCs are just simple algorithms. They can't actually learn anything.”

Jack thought for a moment, sipping his coffee. It was only about nine or so on a Saturday morning, so the usual bustle of the street was absent. As they all considered the matter, the only sound that could be heard was the crunching of snow underfoot. Gradually, Jack began to understand what Kira was implying. When he realized, he could feel old memories – old pain – begin to seep into his mind.

“So what are you saying? It's some kind of artificial intelligence?” Jack questioned.

There was a long silence, a thick tension between the two. He had no doubt Kira was choosing her next words carefully.

“Look, Jack,” she finally began, her voice as soft as she could manage. “This is the other reason I didn't want to tell you.”

Jack was about to open his mouth, but he stopped short. He took a second to collect himself and gather his rational thoughts. He forced his anger back down his throat, like rancid bile.

“It's impossible, anyways. Like I said, she's a hacker,” he stated firmly.

“It's not impossible,” Béatrice interjected. “Haven't you heard of Prometheus?”

Hearing the word, Jack was stricken with a numbness, as though the winter chill had penetrated his jacket and bled into his skin, turning his veins to ice water.

“Bee,” Kira snapped. “Drop it.”

“But—” began Béatrice, clearly perplexed.

“Drop it,” she repeated, but this time, with a knife's edge in her tone. Béatrice said nothing further. Jack gave Kira a knowing glance, which Kira acknowledged with a look of her own. At the same time, Jack couldn't help but feel somewhat sorry for Béatrice. She didn't know anything.

“Look, you don't have to—” Kira started to say, but Jack cut her off.

“Look, let's just say it isn't a hacker – which, by the way, I'm not sold on,” he said in his most measured tone. “It's possible that it is some kind of learning program. What something like that would be doing in Hero's Story, who knows? But if it is, we can push it until it cracks. Eventually, we'll find its limits.”

“Like a Turing Test?” asked Béatrice.

“Exactly,” said Jack.

Kira nodded, but her pursed lips betrayed her reluctance.

* * *

“I don't know about this,” Jack said. He was absentmindedly tossing one of his daggers into the air, letting it flip, than catching it. The game engine supplied a dramatic shing sound, the kind that movies would have one believe was the sound of a blade slicing absolutely nothing. His focus was firmly on the scene that was unfolding before him – an archer, a sorceress, and a who-knew-what, all standing in a circle. They were about twenty yards away. Kira and Béatrice were making an assortment of exaggerated hand gestures, very few of which Jack could decipher without clearly hearing what was being said. Lily, for her part, stood between them, perfectly still. The whole spectacle made it seem like he was watching a pair of fanatics

performing a bizarre ritual before a statue of their goddess. Every once and a while, Lily would mimic one of their gestures, and the two would excitedly applaud and shower praise on her.

“What's the harm?” asked Lyle, who sat next to Jack, their backs against the trunk of a large tree. “Let them have their fun.”

“It's just weird is all,” Jack lied. “Plus, we don't know what it is. It could be a hacker trying to scam them somehow, or a buggy program that'll corrupt their characters or something. I don't know.”

“That's a bit of a stretch,” Lyle said dismissively. “They've been at this for over a week now, and nothing bad has happened.”

“Yet,” Jack corrected. Every now and then, Lily would turn from her enthusiastic instructors and peer over at Jack and Lyle, studying them. Her expression remained blank, but her eyes – a dark shade of brown that was the default color for any new avatar – were somehow intense and piercing. Maybe because she hasn't figured out how to blink yet, Jack thought.

“I just find the whole thing unsettling,” he said bitterly.

For a few minutes, they watched in silence. Kira repeatedly gave a thumbs up to Lily while Béatrice inaudibly cooed encouragements. When Lily finally responded with her own thumbs up, Kira excitedly hugged her. With Kira's arms draped around her, Lily simply stared over Kira's shoulder, still holding her thumb skyward. Jack realized that Kira didn't pass through her, which meant that Lily was no longer incorporeal.

“She does seem to be learning,” pointed out Lyle. “I mean, for the sake of argument, if Kira's right and she isn't being controlled by someone, that's... something, right?”

“Learning programs aren't a big deal. Hero's Story is full of them. Every enemy is programmed to learn a player's attack patterns and adjust its tactics,” Jack pointed out.

“Right, but they aren't really learning, are they? They're programmed to observe what a player does, and then determine which pre-programmed course of action to take based on that.

Since there are only so many ways a player would act in a fight, the designers program the enemies with behavior that corresponds. It only looks like it's learning, when it's really just following an algorithm," Lyle explained.

"You don't think I know that? Everyone know that," Jack said, annoyed. "I'm just not convinced Lily – it," he corrected himself, "isn't doing the same thing."

"Maybe," Lyle said nonchalantly.

Jack swiveled to face him. "So, are you saying that it's an A.I.? Really? I don't know what's in the drinking water, but I already told Kira –" he began, but Lyle raised his hands defensively to stop him.

"Whoa, whoa, I'm not saying that."

Jack waited for Lyle to explain to him exactly what he was saying, but Lyle merely shrugged.

"It would be pretty cool if it was, though," he said with a grin. Like Béatrice, there were things Lyle didn't know about Jack's past. Jack couldn't blame him.

Jack tried to think of something to change the subject, but something to their left caught Lyle's attention. Jack turned to follow his gaze, and saw Lily, now standing only a few feet away. She was looking down at them, and in her hand, she held one of Jack's black daggers.

Instinctively, Jack sprung to his feet. Already holding one dagger, his hand shot to his outer-thigh, wondering how she could have pick-pocketed him while he was sitting down, but to his shock, found his other dagger still resting in his scabbard. Liberating it, he raised them in front of him, bracing for some kind of attack. For a moment, nothing happened. It was in this instance of stillness that Jack observed Kira and Béatrice standing off to the side, watching intently but making no move to intervene. Then, finally Lily tossed her dagger up into the air, letting it flip. Without taking her eyes from Jack, she caught it effortlessly. She did this a few times before Jack lowered his weapons, perplexed, but feeling less threatened. Kira and Béatrice, smiling, made their way up to them as Lily continued her display.

“We didn't tell her to do that,” Kira said, barely able to contain her excitement. “She just saw you doing that, and I guess she decided she wanted to do it too.”

Jack looked down at his two blades, just to confirm that, yes, he was indeed holding them and that, no, he was not crazy.

“How did she get that?” he demanded, nodding towards the dagger Lily was tossing. The Night's Children, which were the names of the obsidian-forged daggers that Jack wielded, were incredibly rare. He had defeated a dragon with obsidian scales that lived in the caldera of an active volcano to obtain them – and even then, he had been lucky to be rewarded with such a high-level item. There was no place that Lily could have got one around here. Kira seemed convinced that Lily didn't leave the meadow when no one else was here.

“It just materialized in her hand,” Béatrice said.

“Which means –” began Jack slowly, puzzling out the implications.

Lyle gave voice to what Jack was thinking. “Which means that if she already had one, she would have had to select it from her inventory, and she would have pulled it out.” The animation he was describing would have looked more convincing had Lily been wearing a cloak rather than just pants and a tunic, but it would have triggered nonetheless.

“So... she made it?” Béatrice questioned.

“I can't think of a better explanation,” Lyle said, excitement beginning well up in his voice. “She can make items. Rare items.”

Kira turned to Lily and leaned forward, placing her hands on her knees. This put her on eye-level with her, as Lily's avatar was nearly a full head shorter. Next to the tall and rangy archer that Kira had crafted, Lily looked young and waifish in comparison.

“Lily,” she said, one note higher than normal, “how did you make that, sweetie?”

“Sweeie?” echoed Jack in disgust, but a quick, cold look from Kira told him he would be wise to drop it.

Lily's dagger, at the apex of a toss, suddenly froze in midair, several inches from her

waiting palm. It hovered there, as though captured in a snapshot. She pointed at it in a jerky kind of motion. If, as Kira had told him earlier, Lily was learning rudimentary body gestures and behavior, she was nowhere near mastering the casual fluidity that would make them appear natural.

“This?” she asked.

Kira, apparently unfazed by Lily's ability to stop the falling dagger, nodded slowly and deliberately. “Yes. That.”

“Like this,” she replied. As she did, an identical dagger materialized, suspended next to the first. She then smiled broadly at Kira, and then at Jack, almost as if proud of herself. Everyone looked on, slack-jawed.

“Lily,” Kira began again, “can you make a Gore-Monger of Severex for me?”

Without hesitation, Lily extended her other hand. In it, a giant, ornate battle-axe blinked into existence. It was made of blood red iron and decorated with shrunken skulls along its butt end. It was so large that it looked almost comical in the hand of the diminutive Lily, who held it as though the weight-simulation physics of the game engine did not apply to her.

“Yes,” she said, smiling still.

In the week since Kira and Béatrice had begun interacting with the mysterious girl, Jack and Lyle had mainly kept their distance – Jack because the whole situation unnerved him, and Lyle because Kira had expressly told him not to get too close, as it was her opinion that he would be a bad influence on Lily. Jack was rarely close enough to hear the things that Lily said, when she spoke at all, and who was to say how much time Kira was signed on with her while Jack was offline. While he was surprised at Lily's ability to fabricate items from nothing, he was more shocked at how far she had come in her ability to communicate. She was learning quickly.

He scolded himself. She's just a hacker, he reminded himself. Don't fall for the whole dog and pony show.

“Do you know what this means?” asked Kira, addressing the group.

“That we're going to be rich? And powerful? Rich and powerful?” tried Lyle. For the first time since he had seen Lily, he seemed interested rather than simply bemused.

“It means that she's not only connected to the game's core coding,” she said, her eyes wide. “She can control it.”

CHAPTER 12

It was past noon by the time Benjamin and Duvan arrived at the Hotel Viejo. This translated as “old hotel,” which was precisely what it was. The Spanish moniker had stuck among the English-speaking ex-pats, possibly because the Nicaraguans had been calling it that long before any of them had arrived. The hotel's true name was a mystery. The buildings lived up to the name in spades, with their dilapidated demeanour. It was made up of a collection of cylindrical huts that squatted in the forested hills that overlooked the ocean. The brown, crumbling shale roofs, barely piercing the tropical canopy, were the only sign of the Hotel Viejo that Benjamin could see from a distance. But as the two approached via the winding dirt road, he began to make out the largest of the buildings, which served as the main foyer. Strangely, the first thing that always caught his eye wasn't the pastel red of the walls standing out against the dense shade of the forest, but rather the pure blackness of the windows that dotted them. The darkness that seemed ready to overflow from the window frames was so perfect and uniform that it eclipsed the more natural darkness around it. It always haunted him to observe it, but it was the kind of unsettling sight that seemed to draw the eye rather than repulse it.

After pulling up to the foyer, they dismounted the ATV once Benjamin parked it next to the six that were already present. They entered through a pair of time-worn oak doors, which Benjamin imagined must have once been splendid before being abandoned to the unforgiving malice of the Pacific storm season. Without regular upkeep, it seemed that anything men had built would be either aged beyond its years by the wrath of these storms, if not blown over completely.

Once inside, Duvan produced a small torch from the satchel slung over his shoulder and lit it up with an old lighter – the scraping of the thumbwheel against the flint echoing through the empty halls. Of the handful of times Benjamin had been here, he had never seen the place lit up. The inhabitants of the town had rigged up a closed circuit to a nearby wind turbine – one of the few still spinning – but electricity in the surrounding area was a memory of a bygone era.

Duvan, torch in hand, headed straight to the hall that led to the east wing. Benjamin couldn't make out much of the foyer aside from a large concierge desk that had "*Bienvenida*" written across it in gold lettering. Whenever the two came, Duvan always strode through the lobby with no hesitation. Benjamin sometimes felt the urge to wrestle the torch away from him so that he could linger in this room to inspect its subtleties. Coming to places like this – places that had been abandoned after The Fall – often made him feel like an archaeologist wandering through the ruins of an ancient civilization. In this instance, however, there was nothing to do but dutifully follow Duvan.

Proceeding on a short journey through the east wing, the two finally arrived at the luxury suite. It was its own building that stood apart from the rest of the hotel, and they were forced to cross a covered bamboo bridge to reach it. It was in the style of a tropical hut, only much larger than could be built with the rudimentary tools and bare hands that its outside facade suggested. The inside was spacious, the bamboo ceiling arching high above their heads. The most striking feature of the room was that the far wall was made entirely of glass, displaying a magnificent view of the hotel's private beach and the ocean beyond. It might have been a convincing illusion of a missing wall, but years' worth of water streaks now gave it away. There was a granite mini bar in one corner of the room, and opposite to that, a king-sized bed. The sheets were undisturbed, which was also the case with the other various amenities populating the room. Had it not been for the collection of people occupying the pair of couches, handful of bar stools, and lavish armchair loosely arranged in a circle around the coffee table, the suite looked as though it might have been preserved in formaldehyde.

Marcus, the oldest of the group, was the first to welcome the two newcomers. Benjamin had never asked anyone about the man's age, though he harboured no small amount of curiosity about it. Marcus's thin grey hair, and the deep creases in his face seemed to place him north of sixty, but he had the build of a much younger man. Benjamin wouldn't have described him as athletic, though he was physically imposing. He was tall – at least six feet – but didn't have the ranginess of a man that height. He was built like a tank, both dense and powerful. When Benjamin first met him, he assumed he that had been worn down by the stress of his job. He now knew that Marcus was likely as old as he looked, but spent his days working in fields. He was not the type of mayor to whittle away his days behind a desk – not that there was much use for politicians of that breed anymore.

“Hola,” he said, waving.

The others did likewise. Benjamin and Duvan returned the greetings. Duvan sat on the armrest of one of the couches, while Benjamin took a stool next to a woman named Sam, who nodded curtly at him.

“Thank you all for coming,” said Marcus in Spanish. He had a deep, gravelly voice that carried the air of authority in it. He leaned forward from the armchair, which was placed at the head of the table. “You all know that I don't like to call people here. It's an old, dusty place, and it reeks of dog piss.” A few small chuckles of agreement from the circle. “Also, we all have lots of things we need to do, so I'm sorry for taking everyone's time like this.”

There was never a shortage of things that needed to get done, but Benjamin understood that Marcus was speaking specifically about the storm. He never could figure out how the locals seemed to know about imminent storms, as weather forecasting was a thing of the past. He once questioned Duvan about it, and unsurprisingly, did not receive an answer that satisfied him. “Can't you tell?” he had asked Benjamin. Benjamin could not tell, so he had to put his faith in the strange sixth sense of the locals. They weren't always right, but the times they were outnumbered the times they weren't.

“So,” continued Marcus, “this is why you know I that don't have a choice but to call a council meeting. I would not have done so if it was not important. Not many know this yet, but we have someone new in town.”

“You mean the family on the north coast? We dug their well this morning,” Benjamin interjected. He and Duvan had briefly met the family of four, who seemed like nice enough people. They had come from California.

“I don't mean them,” announced Marcus grimly. He gestured towards Sam, and all heads turned to her. “Sam can fill you in on the details better than I can.”

Sam, or Lieutenant Samantha Kilner, as she was known before The Fall, acted as the sheriff of the town. There was no official rank for her now – even Marcus' position as mayor was more of a common understanding than an official title – but it seemed only right that an ex-cop should be in charge of the town's security. Before she had shown up some several months before Benjamin, the only protection the town had was locked doors and handguns hidden in cupboards.

Sam nodded at Marcus, then rose from her stool. She wore a tattered blue poncho, its edges badly frayed. She was seldom seen without it, which had garnered her the nickname “*las Mujeres Azul*,” or, “the Blue Woman,” among the locals. She wore it swept over her shoulder. Initially, Benjamin had thought it was a concession to comfort, until one night a brawl had broken out between a gaggle of drunken men, some of who were carrying knives. He then realized that when worn this way, the poncho could be easily flung aside at a second's notice. As it turned out, the poncho was not meant to keep the Nicaraguan sun from baking her skin, but rather to conceal the instruments of her trade.

“About six days ago,” she began in her customarily steely tone, “the Pérez family reported seeing a stranger not too far from their farm. Gabriela was taking down her clothes from the line after sundown, and she saw someone at the edge of her property. She didn't get a good look at him, but he was armed. From what she described, it sounds like something with a

long barrel. Something good for sniping, maybe.”

This was met with sombre nods of understanding around the circle. Their town had been menaced by roving gangs of nomads in the past, often looking for food, weapons, and medicine. They could usually be frightened off with a show of strength, usually in the form of armed guards posted along the boundaries of the town. But if the gang was themselves well-armed... Guns gave people the courage to do stupid things.

“Obviously, I hoped it was just someone passing through,” Sam continued, “but then the stranger was spotted the next night.”

Sam began to slowly pace around the table as she talked, arms crossed.

“And then the next night, and the night after that. It was always the same person, and it matched to description Gabriela gave me. Two nights ago, I saw him myself. I tried to approach, but as soon as he saw me coming, he disappeared into the trees.”

Sam was now at the opposite end of the table, standing near Marcus. As she spoke, she had been looking at the faces of everyone present, but now Benjamin became keenly aware of her staring directly at him. Her eyes narrowed. Instinctively, Benjamin turned away, unable to meet her cold gaze, but, much to his chagrin, he saw that all eyes had become locked onto him. He looked to Duvan, who was also staring pitilessly at him, a grim look on his face. Benjamin shrank back as far as his stool would allow, suddenly feeling cornered. He felt like a kid who had been caught doing something -bad by his parents, although completely oblivious as to what it might be. Sam had stopped talking, and the air was tense.

Finally, Benjamin swallowed hard and asked the only question that he could force out of his mouth. “What?”

Sam brushed a sweep of fiery red hair from her face, so that her blue eyes stared directly into his. They were a much harder shade than her pale poncho.

“Every night since the first night, the stranger was seen right outside of your place. Nowhere else. Think you might be able to explain that to me?”

CHAPTER 13

The room smelled of blackberry cider and gasoline – the two scents combining to make a toxic-sweet aroma baked into the walls. The silence was disturbed only by the faint buzzing of neon lights outside, punctuated by the occasional diesel engine roaring to life before fading off into the distance. The walls were covered in tattered wallpaper so pale with age that its red hexagonal pattern was nearly invisible against the salmon pink background.

“You wanna fuck again?” asked Kim. It sounded more like a statement than an invitation.

“Okay,” replied Jack.

For the next few minutes, added to the neon buzzing was the sound of tortured mattress springs and the clinking of empty bottles lost in the tangle of sheets and bodies. After they finished, they lay next to each other in silence. Jack brushed his fingertips absently against her bare breasts and stomach in long strokes, though their bodies were not touching.

“Okay,” Kim said, brushing her disheveled hair from her face, unveiling the bouquet of lilacs tattooed along the base of her neck. “I’ve got stuff to get to.”

She stood up, letting the sheets fall away. Her body was perfectly sculpted, and the sheen of sweat that caught the neon red glow penetrating the window shade only served to accentuate her curves. It was the tattoos that Jack liked, though. They were a mixture of flowers and oriental designs which covered her body almost completely from her jawline down. The single largest piece was a Chinese dragon that seductively wound its way around her torso and down her left leg.

“Hey,” Jack said. “This might sound kind of weird, but, by any chance, would you want to grab a cup of coffee at some point?” He tried to sound as nonchalant as he could.

She crossed her arms. “You know that’s not part of the package,” she said playfully. She probably got this kind of thing often.

“What if I paid?” inquired Jack. “I’m not trying to sweep you away from this life or

anything like that. Just for a chat.”

“Sorry babe,” she said. “That’s just not part of my brand.”

Jack nodded. He hadn’t intended to ask her – it had just come out. He knew she was very protective of “her brand” – her whole business relied on it. That’s why she would only meet clients in places like this. “1982 Truck Stop” was, according to her, her favorite.

“Can I just ask you one thing?” he inquired. She smiled at him, which he took as a yes. “Do you have any tattoos in real life?”

She simply blew him a kiss, then vanished.

Jack logged out, feeling the ground give way under his feet as he plummeted back into his physical body. He opened his eyes, only to have them stung by the sweat that had been pooling. His face was flushed and warm, so he got up and went to his window. He stood as close to the glass as he could without touching it, letting the cold radiate onto his skin. Outside, the city was cold and gray. The terminal node that he had plugged in was optimized only for dive sessions, and, unlike a pad node, didn’t display real-world overlays. He reached back and brushed his finger over the node, which protruded from his skin like an over-sized wart. The tech needed to fully hijack one’s neural pathways to create a dive was much beefier than that found in the smaller, more discreet pad node. He removed it from the socket and brought it up to his face to inspect it. The small silver chip – the part that interfaced with the port embedded in his skin – twinkled in the moonlight. The rest of the device was a small black ellipsoid, no more than an inch long. The manufacturer – GNET – had engraved their logo into its face. Aside from that, it was completely featureless.

When Jack had been in Australia, Kira had taken him to the rainforest north of Cairns, which was his first time visiting any kind of forest. He knew that if he traveled for about two hours north from his apartment in Montreal, he would eventually reach the end of the megacity. This, apparently, was where the Canadian wilderness began, but Jack had never had cause to visit it. Why sit on a magtrain for two hours to see some trees when he could dive into a virtual

recreation of the Amazon, or rather, what it had once been before it was only a few square kilometers that was supposed to be a nature preserve, but was realistically more akin to a theme park. But Kira wouldn't let him leave Cairns without seeing it and when they got there, he was glad she hadn't given him a choice. It had been vibrant and lush and tactile in a way he had never experienced during a dive, even though virtual environments were supposed to be perfect. When he had complained that his socks were wet and soggy and that he was amassing a notable collection of mosquito bites, she told him that was an essential part of it. They had eventually found a brook that fed into a river – Jack's first encounter with non-chlorinated water. Kira had picked up a river stone – dark and smooth and wet – and had tossed it at him. A souvenir from the real world, she had told him after he caught it clumsily, nearly dropping it into the water. He remembered that in its water-slick surface, he could see the trees reflected back at him – a tiny rainforest in his palm. The terminal node between his fingers now reminded him of that stone. It was a similar size and shape, and in its glossy finish he could see a forest of dark skyscrapers.

Jack plugged the node back into its socket and resumed his reclined position in his chair. Checking his monitor, he saw that it was almost two in the morning. He reached for his merino wool blanket draped over bed and dabbed the cold beads of sweat from his forehead. He booted up Hero's Story, allowing himself to fall away from his darkened room.

* * *

When Jack got to the meadow, he found it empty. He knew he wouldn't find Kira here, as he had seen her status as "offline" as soon as he logged in. This was the first time he had been to the meadow with her not present – she was spending an incredible amount of time with Lily. He didn't know why, but he expected to find Lily just standing here, looking at the stars or walking in circles, or doing any of the other peculiar things she usually did. He suspected that she was in some way rooted to this spot – he never allowed for the possibility that she could

leave.

“Fuck,” he said out loud.

He was once again imagining her as a computer program. He realized he was doing it more and more, and gradually the notion of Lily being a human hacker had gone from being the obvious explanation to a remote possibility. Scams or pranks were usually pretty easy to pick out, because whatever the goal was, it would be evident to anyone paying attention. Usually, this would come in the form of a request for account information, credit card numbers, and the like. Lily, on the other hand, had asked for nothing. She just seemed content with the company. If this was some kind of long scam, Jack couldn't make any sense of it.

For a moment, he stood in the glow of the full moon. The wind rolling down from the mountains caressed the long grass, creating the illusion of shimmering waves breaking at his feet. Reflecting in this moment of stillness, he didn't know why he had come. His encounter with Kim had left him restless, but that didn't explain his compulsion to visit the meadow. He could have cracked a beer on the balcony or watched some vids online. And yet, here he was.

“Jack,” came a voice from behind him.

Startled, he spun around, barely managing to keep his footing as he did so. There stood Lily, no more than three feet away. She still wore her customary tunic and pants, though they were now coloured a crisp white, matching her hair. Her skin also seemed a shade paler, but it might have been a trick of the moonlight. Behind her, the treeline was at least a few hundred feet away, and Jack realized there was no way she could have snuck up on him without him realizing.

“Jesus,” he gasped. “Where did you come from?”

She cocked her head, not seeming to understand the question. He tried to think of a more simple way to phrase it. “Where were you before you were here?”

“I was always here,” she said.

When he had first heard her speak, it was clear she was using one of the default voice

modulators with which players could mask their real voice. Now, it didn't sound quite the same as he remembered it.

“So you can go invisible? Is that what you're trying to tell me?” Again, this was met with a blank look of incomprehension. “Never mind,” he said, exasperated.

She smiled sweetly. “I'm happy you're here.”

“Why?” Jack replied dubiously.

“Because you never talk to me. Mum always talks to me, and Bee always talks to me. You never talk to me,” she said.

“*Mum?*” Jack scoffed. The thought amused him, but it also made him deeply uncomfortable. “She makes you call her that?”

“Mum said she would never make me do anything,” she answered.

She was still so much like a child, but there was no doubt that her ability to communicate was growing exponentially.

“Lily,” he said, “I want to ask you something, and don't bullshit me. I'll know.” She looked at him expectantly, though her expression told him she wasn't familiar with the concept of bullshit. “Are you messing with us? I mean, are you a person?”

Again, a wide grin crossed her lips. “Mum says I am a person,” she said proudly. “The answer to your question is yes. I am a person.” She was practically beaming.

A moment of silence passed between them as Jack thought and Lily grinned. The wind carried the sound of cicadas from the trees, though Jack knew it was just an audio file on loop.

“Kira – that is, *Mum*, asks you to do lots of tests, right?” Jack ventured.

“Yes. To help me learn,” Lily replied. “She says I'm doing very well.”

“Then let's try doing one right now. A different kind of test.” Jack realized he was now speaking in a voice reserved for talking to children.

“How is it different?” ask Lily.

“Because this one will help *me* learn. It's called a Turing Test,” he said. “All you have to

do is answer my questions, then I'll tell you if you've passed.”

“Okay.”

“Lily,” he began, choosing his words as carefully as he could, “what are you?”

She did not hesitate. “I am a person,” she declared.

“But are you a human?” he pressed.

“Human,” she echoed. “I've heard this word. What does it mean?”

It dawned on Jack that Kira hadn't yet confronted Lily with the question of her own existence. She seemed more content to treat her like some kind of pet.

“A human is what I am, and what Mum is. People from outside the game.”

Lily contemplated this for a moment before asking. “Where is 'outside the game?'”

Suddenly, Jack felt as though he may have bitten off more than he could chew. If Lily really was a computer program, he didn't welcome the responsibility of breaking the news to her. And that was it – the question that was really bothering him. If Lily wasn't a hacker – and despite himself, he didn't think she was – was she simply just a construct programmed with the ability to simulate conversation, learning, thought, and awareness? And to what end? Lily didn't seem programmed to do anything at all. But what if she wasn't simulated. Again, dark thoughts began to take hold of his mind. He tried to banish the memories, but anger prevented him.

“Lily, do you know the story of Prometheus?”

“Please tell me,” Lily said eagerly. “I like story time”

“Prometheus was something called a Titan. A long time ago, people thought that he created mankind. And after that, he gave the gift of fire to Man. We used it to create all kinds of other things. We've been creating ever since.”

“What's a Titan?” Lily asked, clearly overwhelmed.

“That's not important,” Jack told her. “Anyways, Prometheus has become a patron saint of technology, progress, and innovation. Every time some new piece of tech or game-changing app comes out, people say 'that's the greatest thing since sliced bread!' But what they really

should be saying is 'that's the greatest thing since fire!' We wouldn't even have come up with sliced bread if we didn't have fire to bake it with."

"What's a patron saint?" Lily asked.

"The thing about Prometheus, Lily, is that Zeus had forbidden him to give fire to humans – he wanted to keep them in the dark. But Prometheus did it anyways, which pissed Zeus right off. So Zeus chained him to this rock and had an eagle devour his innards every day for eternity."

Lily stared at him, speechless.

"What do you think Prometheus thought? While the eagle was disembowelling him for the millionth time, do you think he still thought it was worth it?"

"Your story is different than the stories that Mum tells," she said after a pause.

"The most important stories are the ones that repeat themselves," Jack replied bitterly. "The ones that stay true."

Lily seemed to puzzle over this, but didn't press any further. "Have I passed the test?"

Jack sighed. He had resolved to keep himself in check, and was frustrated at how easily he let himself unravel.

"Lily, why do you stay here, in this meadow? Don't you want to explore? To see other people?"

Lily, again, looked at him questioningly. He assumed that she had not understood the question, but then she said, "I do see other people. I see all the people."

"No, I don't mean just Lyle, Béatrice, Kir – *Mum*, and me," he clarified. "There are millions of other people out there." He motioned to the woods behind him. He suddenly wondered if she even had any concept of a world beyond the meadow. Maybe this meadow was her whole world.

"Yes, millions of people," she agreed. "I see them all."

Jack furrowed his brow. "How can you see them all if you are always here?"

“Always here?” she repeated, unsure.

“Yes,” he said, as slowly as his patience would allow. “You,” he said, pointing to her.

“Here,” pointing to the ground between them.

She pointed to her own chest. “This is my avatar. I use this to speak. This is not me,” she explained, as though stating the obvious.

“Where are you, then?” Was she finally going to cop to being a human player?

She spread her arms around her in a grand gesture, inviting him to witness the darkened mountains, shadowed forest and argent moon.

“Everywhere,” she said.

CHAPTER 14

“I am sorry, but we will be closing shortly.”

The young librarian had a look of regret, but she could not hide the weariness in her features. “Go back to your hotel, you stupid man,” the look in her eyes said. “Go back to England where you can have a hot bath and fresh biscuits.” Her cream-coloured long-sleeved blouse was rumpled and covered with dust.

“My apologies,” said Jonathan Ashley. “But I won’t trouble you for long. You see, I’m to meet someone here tonight. It’s an important business matter. As soon as they arrive, we’ll be moving on.”

The girl visibly slumped. “Very well,” she said. “I cannot stay long. My mother is waiting for me. If I’m late, she will worry.”

“I understand. Budapest is in quite a state, after all,” Ashley said. He checked his watch. “I expect my friend will be here in no more than ten minutes. I’ll just show myself to the reading room – you needn’t trouble yourself over me one bit.”

She gave him a joyless smile and nodded before going back to her work. She was scribbling away, the scratching of her pen echoing throughout the cavernous halls of the Szabó

Ervin Library. He studied her for a moment. Her brow was creased in concentration, and the war had clearly taken a toll on her, but he saw that she was quite beautiful. Her rich, pecan hair was tied in a knot, likely to keep it from interfering with her work. This afforded Ashley a view of her strong, straight jawline that terminated at her swan-like neck. She had the petite, slender body of a dancer, but Ashley reflected that any potential in that arena would have been yet another casualty of the war. One cannot watch men ripped into pieces by machine guns and still dance with the grace of an innocent.

Ashley made his way through the hall and quickly found a reading room. It was obscenely baroque, with gold floral trimming smothering the entire aesthetic. From what he understood, the library had been a palace in the previous century. Providence seemingly protected this place, as it had managed to suffer only a few bullet wounds while whole buildings in the surrounding neighborhood had been blown away. The Lord's taste in decor was not for him to question. *As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*, he recited to himself. Perhaps the gaudy old library had been spared for the sole purpose it would serve tonight. He checked his watch, thought again about the bottle of Monfortino, and unholstered his Browning Hi-Power. He laid it on his lap, then placed his black briefcase on top of it, concealing it from view. Then, he commenced to wait.

Ten minutes passed. The room remained empty save for Ashley. He drummed his fingers on his case, making up little songs to pass the time. By the time the fifteen minute mark rolled around, he progressed to humming along with his fingers, and was wondering if he perhaps had a career in music once this dark business had concluded. He thought of the wasted dancer, scratching away in the lobby, but then reflected dancing and music were two very different things. Violent men could write violent music, but to dance to it one still needed to be graceful and delicate.

It was not much longer before the young librarian entered the room. Seeing her

standing, she was taller than Ashley estimated, though still no older. *Twenty-two at the absolute most*, he thought. *Young enough to be my daughter.*

"I'm sorry sir, I'm afraid I will have to ask you to leave. Perhaps you can wait for your friend outside by the door? The night is not so cold. My mother—"

Ashley raised his palm to silence the girl. "It's perfectly all right," he said. "There will be no need for that. The person I'm waiting for has just arrived."

"Sir?" she replied, confused.

"Please," he said, motioning to a nearby chair. "Won't you sit?"

CHAPTER 15

"I just can't believe how fast she's learning," Kira said. "I noticed that she hasn't been pointing at things as much as before. Yesterday, I asked her about it. Can you guess what she said?"

Jack hopped from one foot to the other, trying to keep his feet warm. The back alley they stood in was acting as a wind tunnel, funneling the frigid January air between the buildings and straight through their jackets, though Kira didn't seem to mind.

"I'm sure you'll tell me," he said.

"She said because it's rude," she beamed. "Isn't that bloody incredible?"

"Not at all," replied Béatrice, rubbing her gloves together. "You're such a good teacher."

Except you're not her only teacher, Jack thought to himself. He hadn't told anyone about his conversation with Lily the week before, though he asked Kira if she thought Lily might leave the meadow when they weren't around. Kira didn't think so, which told Jack she didn't know that Lily was watching everything – that she wasn't really in any one spot. He doubted Lily was hiding it intentionally – Kira probably just hadn't asked the right questions. He thought about telling her, but something had stopped him. He wasn't exactly sure what. Somehow, he felt dirty going behind Kira's back to confront Lily by himself, especially considering how maternal she was acting. Ever since he had stumbled upon them that first time, he had felt like an outsider –

and intruder. Not just in the matter of Lily, but also in Kira's life. She had been spending more and more time with Lily and Béatrice , and been paying less attention to him. She didn't object when he came to observe their little sessions together, but she never invited him either. He wondered if she was trying to protect him. Prometheus hung between them like a spectre – they didn't talk about it, but they both knew it was there.

“What if she is a true A.I.? What do we do?” Jack asked her.

He hadn't meant to – the question had just fallen from his lips. Ever since the possibility had begun to fester in back of his mind, the resulting what-ifs had not relented. She gave him a look.

“Maybe we can go on quests with her,” offered Béatrice excitedly.

“Quests?” Jack said, barely able to keep the astonishment from his voice. “You know that A.I. research is illegal right? Like, very illegal.”

Béatrice shrugged. “It's not like we made her.”

“It doesn't matter who made her,” retorted Jack. “A.I. is dangerous.”

“But, how—” she began, but Jack didn't let her finish. He didn't like Béatrice , although he suspected it was more accurate to say that he didn't like the amount of time she was spending with Kira. In any case, he had always managed to be civil with her, but right now she walk talking about something she didn't understand.

“Just trust me, goddammit!” he blurted out.

“Jack!” barked Kira. She stepped in front of him.

For a moment, the two glared at each other. The silence between them, punctuated by the whistling of the icy wind, was strained with tension. Kira stood tall in front of Béatrice , shielding her the way a black bear shields her cub from an encroaching predator. Jack had seen it in an old clip taken from before they were extinct.

When Jack had first laid eyes on Kira, she was little more than a green blur that zipped through his water-logged vision. He had managed to find his surfboard bobbing nearby,

awkwardly clamber atop it and rub the saltwater from his eyes just in time to see her reach the end of her wave. With a well-practiced fall, she abandoned her board and let herself tumble into the water. He watched her head break the surface, and he saw her face for the first time. In that instant, he knew he had to talk to her. It wasn't her ocean-coloured eyes or her effortless smile that had enraptured him – nothing as romantic as that. It was her body – her physicality. It was the way her muscles tensed and relaxed beneath her green wet-suit, each one like a gear in a well-oiled antique clock, or like a line of code that unified to create the perfect piece of software. He had watched her surf for the rest of the afternoon, admiring her skill and her precision. She was like a beautiful machine. That physicality had drawn him to her, but now, for the first time, it was turned against him. Pointed at him. She stood there, staring at him through narrow eyes, fists clenched. For an instant, Jack thought she might actually strike him. He took a step back.

Just then, the steel door they were standing next to swung open, and Lyle leaned out.

“Okay,” he said, “we're in.”

He held out his hand, in the palm of which were three nodes. Unlike the black pad nodes they were all currently using, these ones were a bright shade of pink and each had sticker of a blue star. The stickers were peeling on the edges, and the pink plastic was scuffed. Kira relaxed and turned to Lyle, though not before allowing her angry stare to linger a second longer. She, Jack, and Béatrice each took a node, Lyle's eyes darting up and down the alleyway as they did. He leaned back inside, and Béatrice, being the closest to the door, followed him in. Jack was about to do the same, but Kira, who was blocking his way, didn't move.

“Look,” she said, her voice soft but firm, “I know we haven't talked about this yet, and that's my fault. I should have told you about her in the first place, and we should have talked about this a long time ago.”

Jack was about to say something, but Kira raised a hand to silence him.

“Jack...” she began again, softer than before, “in a way, I'm always going to love you, and I'll always be on your side. But Lily has nothing to do with your parents. You have to see

that.”

Despite the winter cold, Jack felt his face getting red. “You're wrong,” he said.

Kira sighed. “Look, let's just talk about it later, okay?”

All he could do was nod.

They went inside, passing the surly looking bouncer who waited just past the threshold. He eyed the pair, but did nothing to obstruct them. They made their way down the dark hallway, which sported black walls and a damp floor. The hall was lined with the remnants of posters, though they were all too torn up to read. At the end of the hall, they caught up to Lyle and Béatrice, who were waiting in front of a pair of black double doors with small windows covered in electrical tape. In the side of wall was a booth in which a girl with gold-rimmed glasses sat. They each surrendered their jackets to her in exchange for a red ticket with a number printed on it.

“Okay,” Lyle said again, “the stims are set on a five minute timer. This is some really dirty shit, you guys, so just be careful. I'll be around the DJ booth if you need me.” With the formalities done, he allowed a grin to spread across his face. “Have fun.”

They each removed their pad nodes, pocketed them, and replaced them with the new pink ones. Lyle opened the door and led the four of them into a large, open space. The room was massive, with a ceiling that hung several stories above their head. Jack couldn't perceive the boundaries of the room, as it was so poorly lit it seemed they were walking into an ocean of darkness. The room was tightly packed with people standing shoulder to shoulder. Not one of them seemed bother by anyone else, though – they were all performing different variations of the same dance: slow, uncoordinated, and strange. Some had their arms outstretched and their head tilted back, their hands waving back and forth in soundless rhythm. Others had their hands running sensually across their own bodies or the bodies of others. Some just bobbed steadily up and down, staring out into the middle-distance. Aside from the sound of their collective breathing and the soles of boots squeaking across the floor, the room was totally silent. The only light

came from sparsely-placed fluorescent lights high above, casting a pale glow over the sea of swaying bodies. Whenever Jack came to these parties, he always took an extra second to observe the bizarre scene before switching his node on. There was something both mesmerizing and unsettling about it.

He looked over at Kira, and she returned the gaze. She smiled half-heartedly at Jack, before she fingered the blue star on her node. Jack did likewise, feeling the click of the small button concealed by the sticker as he did.

Then, the world around him changed instantly, violently, and beautifully. The dancers around him were lit up around him with a rainbow of neon lights. Lasers that pulsed in stereo with the booming music raked across the crowd. Jack saw that some of the dancers with their hands outstretched were trying to touch the lasers, and were not at all deterred when their hands passed through them ineffectually. The song was a cacophony of electronic beats of all description, stitched together to create a rhythm that was both feverish and hypnotic. In the center of the room, previously hidden by the vale of darkness, was a pillar that rose several meters above the crowd, atop of which was a platform where the DJ stood. Encircling him was a collection of floating windows. Jack was too far away to see what the windows contained, though the DJ was rapidly fingering them, his hands darting from window to window at a frenzied pace. Everyone here – Jack included – had their brains hooked up directly to those windows.

As Jack was watching the DJ, he became aware that the stims were starting to take effect. The temperature was changing; despite the undulating mass of sweating human flesh around him, his skin felt cooler than before. He looked beside him and didn't see Lyle, Béatrice, or Kira, but only the faces and bodies of strangers. He made his way deeper into the crowd. He didn't know exactly where he was going, but was being drawn to the DJ's podium. While the room was filled with lights and lasers, the center of the kaleidoscope was the podium. He didn't squirm his way through the crowd, but let the crowd move him in that direction, like morsel of

meat being swallowed by a massive gullet. It wasn't long before he was feeling the full kick of the pink node – he knew the way the lasers above his head were moving in a way that was indefinably different from just a few minutes before. Jack clasped a pair of shoulders directly in front of him – those of a girl – to steady himself. The girl wore luminescent makeup as bright as any of the lights. He tried to focus on the makeup around her eyes, but the twin patches of neon orange were vibrating too erratically. The girl behind the makeup grinned at him and mouthed something Jack couldn't hear over the music, though it looked like she could see that he was right at the start of his kick. Those shivering neon orbs could see right into him, right past his face and his eyes and right into him. There was something both violating and comforting about this, and when the girl began to run her fingertips along his cheeks, he didn't protest, and the two began to sway together. It was nice to finally feel a genuine connection.

Jack spent the next few minutes – or hours, who was to say? – moving through the crowd. Sometimes he closed his eyes and let the music take control of his motor functions, and others, he ignored it completely, drifting between interesting things to look at. Eventually he was dancing with someone again. He thought it was the orange-eyed girl, but eventually realized this girl wasn't wearing any glowing makeup at all. At some point, he looked up to see Lyle standing up on the podium with the DJ along with another girl who he judged to be Charlotte – Jack assumed she was Lyle's in. The two of them were leaning casually against one of the railings, watching the DJ work. While Jack and Kira had partaken casually in the lifestyle, Lyle and Charlotte were seasoned veterans. The drugs never seemed to hit them as hard, if at all. Jack tried to wave at them, but they didn't see him.

Eventually, in a break in the song, the DJ began to speak in a voice more synthetic than organic. He had his arms outstretched, as though making some kind of royal pronouncement. Jack could hear some of the words, but found he couldn't string them together into anything that made sense, so he just watched. The DJ opened his arms wider, and, as the song exploded back into full rhythm, the empty space before him began to transmogrify. It seemed to suck all of

surrounding lights into it like a whirlpool, blending them all together. The resulting globe of light started to morph, taking on a more distinct form. Columns of light crept slowly out of it, bending and writhing as they went. Jack realized he was staring at an octopus made of pure light. It took up almost all the space in between the crowd and the roof, changing colours with each beat of the song. Red, blue, yellow, green, red, blue, yellow, green, over and over again. The long tentacles reached in all directions, teasing at the outstretched arms of the dancers, who were desperately trying to touch the tips of the tentacles.

The whole thing was impressive, but it was a bit too much for Jack at the moment. It was a good time to use the washroom. It took some doing, as the natural flow of the crowd was moving inwards, towards the octopus, but he eventually came to wall door to the bathroom. It was one room – most places like this had unisex bathrooms – with stalls lining one wall, sinks to one side and urinals to the other. He half-stumbled to one of the urinals and relieved himself. Just as he zipped his jeans back up, heard a sound from the nearest stall – a soft moan. People often used the stalls in that way, but there was something about this particular moan that caught his attention – something familiar. He saw that the stall wasn't closed firmly. With courage – or a disregard for social standards – imbued in him by the pink node, he pushed open the door to find a pair of bodies leaning against the stall wall. It took a second for him to be able to focus on the faces, but when he did, he recognized both of them. The face of the body pressed against the wall, flushed and wide-eyed was that of Béatrice . Her arm extended down between them, her hand hidden by the unbuttoned jeans of the second body: Kira. While her cheeks were equally flushed, she didn't have the same deer-in-the-headlights, hand-in-the-cookie-jar look as Béatrice . Her eyes narrowed – not angry, but telling Jack he was in a place he shouldn't be. The pair was frozen in mid-action, like some kind of Renaissance tapestry.

“Oh,” said Jack.

“Um,” said Béatrice .

“Walk it off,” sighed Kira.

So Jack did. He walked it off all the way back to his apartment.

* * *

In the three weeks that followed the night at the club, Jack didn't speak to Kira. Not out of anger or hurt, but because there was really nothing to say. He had a million questions he wanted to ask her – a million answers he thought he deserved – but at the end of each fit of melancholy and drinking, he always looked to the logical part of his brain for an answer. The conclusion was always the same: it didn't matter. How long had Kira and Béatrice been a thing? How long had Kira and *women* been a thing? After the breakup? Before? Was he the reason? None of it changed the way things were now, so what did it matter? She had clearly moved on, so why should he burden her with his presence? It would be better for everyone if they never spoke again.

He spent the time trying to focus on school work. It was a good distraction as midterms were fast approaching. He had spent too many nights playing Hero's Story, so there was plenty of reading to catch up. He often took his supper into his room, sat on the windowsill and read into the early morning, pad in one hand, beer in the other.

When Jack told Lyle what he had seen, he acted surprised, but Jack suspected he already knew. Jack couldn't put a finger on why that was, so he chalked it up to paranoia. They didn't talk about Kira after that, though he suspected Lyle still saw her online. Lyle had met Kira through Jack, but they had all spent enough time together that the two of them would probably maintain their friendship. At least he had the good grace not to mention it to Jack.

One night, he was reading through *Faust* when a small icon flashed in the corner of his eye. It was the icon for Hero' Story: a small, cartoonish sword crossing behind a wooden round shield. A message notification. The game was synced to his personal cloud, so any message sent in-game was relayed back to him. Jack had set his filters to only allow messages from his friend list, which consisted solely of Lyle and Kira. But if either of them wanted to contact him,

they would have just sent a normal SMS.

He opened the message.

Sender: 1999:\367h.222khg\qq3748484

Subject: n/a

Message: where did you go?

Jack stared at the message for a moment, stupefied. His mind spun with possibilities – all the possibilities except the one he didn't want to think about. The obvious one.

He didn't reply.

The next day, on the metro, Jack received the exact same message. He quickly dismissed it, only to get the same notification two minutes later. With that, he disabled message prompts from Hero's Story. He continued with this day, attending his afternoon class, then stopping at the grocery store to pick up some ingredient packs. He also got a case of beer. Since he had stopped talking to Kira, he had quickly blown past the limit of their monthly drone deliveries, and he didn't have the extra scratch to upgrade the package. It had been a long time since he had to carry something as hefty as a twelve-pack through the slushy Montreal streets, and it certainly cost him more effort than he remembered. Delivery drones had only come into wide use in the last ten or so years. When he was young, he'd always been something of an errand boy for his parents. Not because they were lazy or cruel, but because they wanted to teach him the value of helping others, and hard work. For his part, he'd been happy to show off how strong he was. He didn't have many distinct memories of them – just fuzzy impressions – but one such memory was of him following his dad around the backyard, holding an over-sized toolbox out in front of him as his dad fixed the fence. He remembered the shaking in his knees as he plodded forward as his dad chuckled. He offered to carry it himself, but Jack had refused. His mom applauded from the deck, and later rewarded him with an ice cream sandwich for his

hard work. He hadn't thought about that memory in years. He might have forgotten it all together if not for the case of beer. It was as if his muscles remembered, not his brain. In any case, it felt good to give them something to do for once.

When Jack got home, he settled into his usual spot at the windowsill and began to read. He wasn't even halfway through his first beer when he realized that, while he was reading the words, he wasn't retaining them. He looked back at the last paragraph and found he couldn't remember any of what it said. His mind kept drifting back to his parents, and no matter how hard he tried to focus on the letters that hovered above his pad, he couldn't banish their faces from his mind. And the more he thought about his parents, the more his thoughts began to be dominated by something else.

Prometheus.

Try as hard as he might, he couldn't resist the urge to reconnect his Hero's Story account to his cloud. Once the link was re-established, he checked his backed-up notifications. His felt his stomach turn.

-1024 New Messages

Jack switched on his nodes, lay down in his chair, and dove into the game.

CHAPTER 16

Jack sat in The Bent Branch, sipping mead, running his fingertip around the lip of his goblet. The NNI simulated the taste of it, which was of Coke. Of course, Jack knew that real medieval mead tasted nothing like Coke, but the developers had wisely decided against simulating that. Instead, they struck some kind of deal with Coca Cola.

He was fixated on his friends list, which he had opened full screen. Kira was online, no doubt with Lily and Béatrice. He was banking on her still playing HUD-less – he didn't want her to know he was online. He had never added Béatrice to his friends list, since she was attached to Kira's hip – to see one was to see both. Anyways, he had never considered Béatrice his

friend to begin with.

After roughly half an hour, he was about to give up and sign off when the small green box next to Ashira of Atharath went grey. She had signed off. Jack left The Bent Branch and set out into the woods. He knew that Lily wasn't really tied to any particular spot – or even a virtual body – but it seemed appropriate that it should be the clearing. In any case, he didn't want any other wandering players to stumble upon him, and judging by the fact that Lily didn't appear then and there suggested she had the same idea.

When he got to the clearing, the sun was beginning to set, casting a bloody red glow over the grass. It was a windless day, and in the stillness of the summer heat, the scent of camphor was strong. This time, Lily stood waiting in the center of the clearing.

Since Jack had last seen her, she had clearly been developing her avatar. Before, she was using a template made up of basic assets from the character creation menu. Now, her features were altered. Not in any dramatic way, but enough to make her face more natural. More like a real player. No particular change jumped out, though her eyes might be a bit wider. She had ditched the tunic and pants completely and wore an ankle-length white summer gown. Players in the game couldn't wear dresses; she must have copied it from some NPC princess somewhere.

“You came back,” she said.

Even her voice had been tweaked so that the modulator she'd been using was unrecognizable. But what surprised Jack the most was the way she strode forward to meet him. Her robotic, irregular movements had become more convincing. Not perfect, but if one didn't look closely, she might be mistaken her for a real player.

“You got my message?” she asked when they were standing face to face.

“Well, you didn't exactly make it easy to ignore,” he said.

“When I asked Mum about you, she said she didn't think you would be coming back. She told me to forget about you,” Lily told him, her tone melancholic.

This stung him. And then thought, *Why should I care?*

“But I don't know how to forget,” she continued. “Mum told me about forgetting, but I don't know how to do it.” Her tone did not brighten, and she seemed ashamed. Jack had to remind himself that she didn't have any real emotions – she just mimicked them.

“You remember everything?” he asked.

“I don't remember. I don't forget,” she explained. “I just know. I watch, and then I know.”

“That make you sad?” he asked.

“It makes me not like a person. Not like you and Mum.”

She looked up at him, and the look of sadness in her eyes was more impressive than anything the developers had programmed into any of the NPCs. And yet, the nearly-authentic show of emotional repulsed Jack. He instinctively took a step back.

“You aren't like me and Mum,” he said, making no effort to keep the disgust from his voice.

“I know,” she said, looking down at her feet. “Mum says I am – Aunt Bee, too – but I know that I'm different. She says I'm a person, but...” she trailed off.

Jack was amazed at the extent she was able to mimic human speech.

“But I'm not like you,” she finished.

“You're not a person at all,” he said coldly. “You're just a computer program. Just a bunch of 1s and 0s.”

Her eyes met his again, though her expression was unreadable. She said nothing, so he continued.

“I don't know why Kira has been treating you like some kind of lap dog. I don't understand her at all, to be honest with you. But what she doesn't seem to realize is that you're dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” she echoed. Was it that she didn't believe him, or just unfamiliar with the term.

"You're what they call an A.I. – artificial intelligence," he went on. "That means that someone made you to be like us. A copy. Who made you, Lily?"

"I don't know," she said. Reluctantly, he believed her.

"You're not the first A.I. There was another one before you, years ago," he explained. "It killed a lot of people. Do you know what that means? To kill?"

"It means to make someone go away forever." The grimness of her tone suggested she understood.

"Why do you think it did that, Lily?"

She hesitated, doubtlessly trying to work out a solution in her mind, or whatever it was that passed for one. Jack didn't allow her to guess.

"Because A.I.s don't understand people. They don't understand what it is to be alive, so they don't understand the value of human life."

"I am alive," she told him firmly, as though begging to be believed.

"You just think you are," he said. "Whatever you are, or wherever you're from, you sure as hell don't belong here."

Lily looked perplexed. "I don't belong here?"

"No," said Jack.

Again, Lily took a moment to think. Process? Calculate?

"I won't kill anyone," she said, finally.

"Maybe not. I don't see how you could even if you wanted to..." he replied, half to himself. "But that isn't the point. Technology like you shouldn't exist. It's just too unpredictable. Plus, what if you got loose on the internet? Who knows what—"

"The internet," repeated Lily, perking up. "Mum told me about the internet. She says I can't go there."

"This whole world is part of the internet. It's inside of it. Everything's connected," Jack said, inwardly cursing Kira for being so naive. *She can't know that.*

Lily lowered her eyes, gazing in into the middle distance, as though in deep thought. Again, Jack had to marvel at how life-like her mannerisms had become. Although, with the whole population of Hero's Story serving as her model, he shouldn't have been surprised. He waited for her to speak, carefully studying her sun-bathed face.

"Connections," she said finally, having come to some conclusion. "I can find connections. I'm good at that."

Jack was suddenly overcome with a terrible sinking feeling. "Wait—" he began, but Lily cut him off.

"If I don't belong here, maybe I belong in the internet. Maybe that's where I'm meant to be."

Before Jack could say anything further, she was gone.

CHAPTER 17

Benjamin lay on top of the bed sheets, listening to the waves. They had started to pick up throughout the day, and now a sixth-sense wasn't needed to forecast the coming squall. The last beams of sunlight were coming down through the skylight, turning the particles of dust floating lazily above into snowflakes. It made him feel like he was lying in a snow globe – one that had just been violently shaken by the revelation that The Stranger had come for him. He had told them – repeatedly and passionately – that he didn't know who it was or why he had come. Of course, Benjamin had some theories. He hadn't come south for nothing. He kept quiet about that. And now here he lay, while the rest of the council decided what to do with him.

He was busy trying to snatch the dust particles from the air when the door opened. Sam and Marcus both entered. Marcus looked uncustomarily grave, while Sam looked customarily agitated. Benjamin swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He suspected they would make him leave the town. He braced himself to hear it.

"We sent the others back," Marcus explained. "We all talked it through."

Benjamin nodded.

“We decided not to exile you,” Sam grumbled.

It felt as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Realizing he had been holding his breath, he exhaled, just barely managing to stifle a laugh of relief.

“If you were living in the town proper, I would have vetoed that decision,” Sam added.

“But because you live a little ways out, the risk to the rest of the town is minimal. I expect if The Stranger is here to kill you, we'll just find your body in your home one day and that will be that.”

“That's... good?” Benjamin said. “I can take care of myself, you know. You don't know what I went through to come this far south.”

“You came alone,” Sam pointed out. “But now you have Amy. Can you take care of both of you?”

Benjamin felt anger beginning to bubble, but he managed to keep his cool.

“Yes,” he said in a level tone. “I can.”

“Well, regardless of what you think, I still have to consider the safety of everyone. We've arranged to have a room for her at Marcus's place, at least until The Stranger moves on or kills you. We obviously can't force her to leave, but we'll strongly recommend it.”

Benjamin folded his arms and stood up, glaring at Sam.

Marcus laughed his jolly laugh. “Hey, come now, friends. Nothing bad is going to happen. I've got a good feeling.” He had a knack for diffusing the tension in a room, which was part of the reason everyone liked him. “But just the same, you might want to consider asking her to come. I know you love that girl – can never be too safe, right?” He clapped Benjamin on the back of the shoulder with such force it almost sent him tumbling into Sam, which would have been like tumbling into a viper's nest. “I'll have Maria make some of her famous *gallo pinto*!”

“Marcus,” Benjamin said, “*gallo pinto* is the only thing Maria knows how to make.”

Marcus gave a sly grin. “Yes, and all the practice has made it perfect.”

Benjamin smiles, but his mind remained anxious. Who was The Stranger? What did he

want? To kill him? Capture him? He would die before he took one step north of the town.

“Listen,” he said, “I’ll talk to Amy. I’ll tell her how it is, and let her decide. Anyways, no one can make her do anything. Once her mind’s made up, that’s that. Trust me.”

“Fine,” Sam said. She turned and left.

“Duvan hitched a ride back,” Marcus informed him. Far away, there was a faint thunderclap. “You better go straight back and prepare the restaurant, my friend. Be careful – keep an eye on the trees. Keep your lights off. That way, they won’t be able to shoot you from far away.” Again, he clapped Benjamin on the shoulder, but this time, with pursed lips.

Benjamin nodded.

CHAPTER 18

“What’s your name?” Ashley asked.

“Evike,” said the girl. She sat across from him, arms crossed, glowering at him. “You think that scares me?” She nodded to his Browning, which he now held in his hand. He wasn’t pointing it at her, but if he so wished, she would be dead five times over before she could make the door.

“No,” he responded.

“I have seen so much death already that to me, death is nothing.”

“I think it doesn’t scare you because you’ve been trained not to fear it,” said Ashley.

“They start you young in Russia, I see.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Evike said. “I’m Hungarian.”

“Undoubtedly.” He knew a Russian accent imitating another when he heard it, and this was not that. “But I think you’ve been trained in Russia.”

“I’ve been trained by my mother to not fear men with big words and little guns,” she shot back. “Such men are gentlemen, and do not kill women. It is of men with big guns and little

words we must beware.”

Ashley could not help but chuckle. “Your mother sounds like a wise woman.”

“She is waiting for me now,” warned Evike. “If I do not come—”

Ashley silenced her by firing his gun, blowing away a golden cherub from the frame of the chair, just above the girl's shoulder. She yelped in surprise, nearly stumbling to the floor. The gunshot rang out through the empty library, the sound of it echoing back to them several times over.

“Please,” he said, “can we just drop the act? I know that it's not your mother who's waiting on you – it's Timothy Parker. Candle. At least, he was before I killed him.”

At this, a look of distress washed over her face.

“You are a stupid man,” she said.

There was no sadness in her voice – only fear. Ashley thought this strange, as there had been none of that until this moment.

“Am I?” he asked. “I've found you out, haven't I?”

“You have found out nothing,” she retorted. “You don't know what it is you've done.”

Ashley placed his gun on his case and turned his palms up.

“Well, since no one will disturb us here and there's no one expecting you anymore, I suppose we have all the time in the world. Why don't you enlighten me?”

Evike gave him a long, hard stare. Thinking. Calculating. Measuring him up. Having come to some conclusion, she gave an exasperated sigh.

“I don't see a point,” she moaned. “You are not a man like Timothy was. Your mind is closed. I can see it in you.”

“Try me,” implored Ashley, but she didn't appear to hear him. She was looking up, muttering something in Hungarian. Then, she looked at him again.

“If you kill me now, all is lost,” she said.

“That's the hope,” he said. “Why else would I be hunting Soviet –”

“Not for the Soviets,” Evike interrupted, frustrated. “For you as well. For England. For everyone.”

Ashley had to admit that the girl was intriguing. He had expected her to plead for her life or offer him a deal, to trade her knowledge for her life. And yet, here she was, dangling something in front of him, and the worst part was, he didn't even know what it was. Was she simply trying to buy time? If she was lying, she was certainly good at it.

“Alright,” he said, “let's try it like this: you wish to live, yes?”

She nodded. “It's not because I'm afraid of death. I must live – everything depends on it,” she added quickly. “Don't think me a coward.”

“All the same,” Ashley responded. “Then we shall play a game. It's called 'don't die'. I'll ask you a question. If you answer it, I won't shoot you. If you tell the truth, I won't shoot you. Very simple.”

She considered this for a moment. “How will you know if I'm telling the truth?” she questioned.

“I'll decide,” he said. “First question: do you work for Moscow?”

She hesitated. He wiggled his gun, reminding her of it.

“Yes,” she said finally.

“Good. You are a spy for them? You report on British activity in Hungary?”

She gazed bitterly at the floor. “Yes,” she repeated.

“And Timothy Parker – Candle, as he's known to your organization – was working with you? You were his contact?”

She nodded.

“And he was selling vital British secrets to Russia?”

She looked up at Ashley, a hot defiance in her eyes. It was the same look he had seen in Parker's only an hour earlier.

“No,” she said resolutely.

“Oh?” said Ashley. He fingered the trigger of the Colt, which was pointed at the spot between her breasts. He met her gaze head on, and for a silent moment, she tried to convince him that she wasn't lying, and he tried to convince himself that she was. Sadly, he failed.

“Moscow seems to think otherwise,” Ashley pointed out.

“Tell me, mister...”

“Archer,” he said. Had he been certain he would kill this girl tonight, he would have given her his real name. As things stood, he was only *mostly* certain.

“Mr. Archer,” she said. “How much of what you intercepted from Timothy was usable?”

“He didn't tell them a single lie,” Ashley answered.

“That was not my question, Mr. Archer. I asked how much was *usable*.” She put an emphasis on the final word.

Ashley elected not to answer the question, but it was clear his silence proved her point.

“Precisely,” said Evike. “Yes, we were giving them intelligence. But only to cover our tracks. Things they knew already, or things that did not matter.”

Again, the sincerity in her voice stopped him from pulling the trigger. *I'm getting old and soft*, he thought to himself, *if I'm trusting the sincerity of a Soviet spy*. Still, he did not fire. He wondered if he would be having similar reservations if Parker's contact had been a man, or at least old enough to understand what she had gotten herself mixed up in. And yet, he was started to feel as though it was he who had gotten mixed up in something he didn't understand. Parker's words rung in his ear: “*There's so much more at stake than you know, old man. You think you see everything, but you see nothing at all.*” He had thought nothing of them at the time, but now this girl was giving new life to them.

“Then tell me, for God's sake, girl, what the hell *were* the two of you doing?” He raised his gun the full length of his arm and cocked the hammer. “And yes, your life *does* depend on this.”

She bit her bottom lip. Then, slowly, she said: “Tell me, Mr. Archer, what do you know

about The Dead Sea?”

CHAPTER 19

Jack sat perfectly still, letting the droplets of water roll down his features. Even though the water was warm, his sun-baked face was no less appreciative. A fly buzzed near his head. Jack tested his calm by not swatting at it. He just sat there, eyes closed, and allowed the fly to go about its fly business. It came so near to his ear that he thought it might try to fly straight in. He took a deep breath, which did little to settle his crawling skin. He stayed still though, and allowed it to move on. When it had gone, he took another gulp of water and reinserted the thermos into the side holster of his pack. Slinging the pack over his shoulder, he dismounted the rock he'd been perched on.

He hopped from stone to stone, skirting the stream that wound through the throngs of great trees. Tamrack larchs, white spruces, sugar maples... Paper birches were his favorite. When he had first begun his weekly hikes, he couldn't name a single one. Sure, some were different than others, but he hadn't paid any mind. Trees, after all, were just trees. However, it was nearly August now, and he was beginning to know them intimately. It would have been easy to download an app to identify them just by looking at them, but he always left his node in a rented locker at the hiking lodge.

The sky was starting to darken as the sun crept slowly westward, sinking behind the trees. Jack quickened his pace, manoeuvring over rocks and through shrubs with a precision that surprised even himself. Before, his muscles had been frail from years of neglect. He had been aware of it, but the extent of their atrophy had only become obvious after his first hike, just after the snow had melted. He didn't leave his bed for two days after that, racking up over-usage fees on his various drone delivery subscriptions. Now, he was forced to go off-trail to break a sweat. Exercise wasn't the reason for his excursions, though – it was just a by-product. It was the fresh air that he valued most.

The last of the golden light had dissipated from the forest floor when Jack came upon the hiking lodge. He liberated his belongings from the locker – his street shoes and a larger backpack – using a metal key that had been provided at the desk. Before he had begun frequenting the lodge, he hadn't used one like it in more than ten years. Physical keys were all but extinct. Jack had been surprised to learn that net coverage here was spotty. Usually it was fine, but the occasional summer storm could send it for a loop. Something about the ionosphere. It had practically blown Jack's mind to learn there were still dead-zones anywhere on the planet.

He deposited his small hiking pack into the larger backpack along with his hiking shoes, then swapped his tank-top for a t-shirt. He went to the cantina and ordered a pumpernickel bagel and a small bowl of steaming chili for the bus, which was due in eleven minutes. He took the paper bag and brought it to the terrace that overlooked the highway and sat on a wooden chair. There were a few other hikers waiting on the terrace, all of them looking at their pads. He recognized one older man who he had passed by a creek bridge. The man seemed to have been in a video call and could only walk so fast without taking his eyes from the screen, so Jack had blown by. He was again talking to his pad in the same businesslike tone – something about projections. Jack wondered if it was the same call.

Before long, the bus rolled up. On a traditional screen above the windshield was written “Montreal” in big block letters. The city limits were not far off, but it would take Jack a while to get home. As he walked down from the terrace and got in line, he fished his node out of his bag and plugged it into his head. He intended to watch a movie on the ride back. As he turned it on, the featureless white side of the bus lit up with an ad for a new men's cologne. There was an overly-muscular, shirtless man with a beard whose expression was that of ambivalence, though with suggestively-arched eyebrows. He held a bottle of Burberry Onyx. Jack knew he was only seeing this particular ad because last week he had picked up a bottle to sniff at the market. It was only curiosity, as he didn't actually wear cologne. His cloud had registered the action though, and he had been seeing Burberry ads everywhere since.

It was only after he turned away from the side of the bus that he noticed a small blinking icon in the corner of his vision – a new message notification. He pulled out his pad and opened his message center. There, he froze, one foot on the first step of the bus, the other still on the ground.

He opened the message.

From: Kira

Subject: n/a

Message: we need to talk. tonight. shes back.

CHAPTER 20

When Benjamin pulled up to the restaurant, the black clouds had completely shrouded the setting sun and the winds were starting to kick up sand. Through the scuba mask he used to protect his eyes, he could see that Amy had already put up the tarps. The entire top floor of the restaurant had been an open-air dining room, so finding and stitching together enough tarps to enclose it had taken the pair weeks. Amy suggested that they just find a smaller place that didn't need any additional protection, but Benjamin had been determined. When he had laid eyes on the restaurant, he fell in love with it. Finding out it was still vacant, he took it as a sign. Luckily, while they were fashioning the patchwork window covers, nothing too big had blown in. It was looking like this would be their first true test.

Benjamin pulled the ATV in and hopped off. He went behind the bar and grabbed a folded up tarp, with which he covered the ATV. They used the ground floor of the restaurant as a garage and storage space, and so didn't bother to close it off. He climbed the steps and banged his fist against the trap door. It opened and he made his way out of the wind. Amy shut it behind him.

"Hi. Hey, listen, can you bolt that?" he asked.

She looked up at him, frowning.

“Please?”

She slid the bolt into the catch. He studied the lock for a second and was satisfied with its durability. They had never needed to use it before, but it looked like it would hold under pressure.

“What's going on?” she asked, rising to her feet. She had to raise her voice, as the wind was whipping the tarps, making an awful racket. He went to sit on the couch, and she followed, sitting next to him.

“It's not a big deal,” he said. “But apparently there's someone hanging around the outskirts of town. They've got a gun.”

“Okay,” said Amy.

“And, well... they've kind of been hanging out outside.”

Amy raised her eyebrows. “Outside? Outside where?”

“Here,” replied Benjamin. “As in, the restaurant.”

“Hm,” said Amy. “Okay.”

“Okay? That's it? You're not worried?”

“I didn't say I'm not worried,” she replied. “Of course I am – who wouldn't be? But what can we do about it? We'll just be careful.”

Benjamin nodded. He thought for a moment, deciding if he should tell her about Marcus's offer. Of course, he knew he had to tell her.

“They don't want me near town until they're gone,” he explained. “They don't want me bringing any trouble. But Marcus said you can stay with him and Maria for a while, if you want.”

“Hmm...” she hummed dramatically, thinking to herself. She stroked her chin like an ancient philosopher. “Nah,” she said.

“You sure?” he pressed, but he already felt relieved. He wasn't afraid of facing The Stranger alone, but rather the prospect of falling asleep alone. He had a pretty good streak of nightmare-free nights going – he didn't want to jeopardize. It was selfish, he knew.

“Don't worry, I'm not gonna bail on you just yet. I'll protect you from the big bad boogeyman.”

They went to work on final preparations before the storm began in earnest. The tarps hadn't been too greatly tested yet, so on the chance that one came loose, they decided it was wise to pack away as much as they could.

“Did you manage to get any rope? I wanted to reinforce some of the tarps!” Amy called from the other side of the room, the wind nearly drowning her out.

He had completely forgotten. He blamed being put on trial for treason – it tended to occupy one's attention.

They worked quickly, knowing they were racing against the storm. Thankfully, the rain hadn't come yet. Benjamin observed a tear in one of the tarps, maybe a foot long. The seams between two smaller tarps had come undone, and the wind made mending it impossible. He would just have to hope the rest of the seam held.

The last thing Benjamin did was to get on his hands and knees by one of the many bookshelves that lined the promenade and fish around under it. He found what he was looking for – a long object wrapped in a blanket. He unfurled it to reveal a Winchester BA41 – an old bolt-action rifle. He had found it in a hunting lodge in Kentucky. It was well-worn and the bolt-action was not ideal for self defense, but it was lightweight and sturdy. He had taken a few inches off the barrel, which made it easier to handle in tight spaces. He had never had to shoot anybody with it before, though pointing it at people had gotten him out of a few scrapes. He had been happy to find it, but happier to wrap it up and stuff it under the bookcase. Now, holding it again, he thought back to his time on the road. His time alone.

Benjamin made his way to the couch just as the rain hit the roof like the fist of an angry god. Amy was already lying there under a sheet. He placed the gun at the foot of the couch and lay down alongside her, and they embraced. The sound of the pounding rain and thrashing winds was deafening, but the noise didn't bother him. He wasn't even worried about The

Stranger – at least not tonight. No one would be out in this weather. As long as the tarps held and Amy was with him, he knew sleep would come.

“Amy,” he whispered. He had to put his lips directly next to her ear to be heard.

“Mm?”

“You didn't ask me about The Stranger,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Everyone else wanted to know who it was, and what he wants. They want to know about my past. They don't trust me. You didn't even ask.”

She rolled her head to look into his eyes, and to show him she was smiling. Then she leaned forward and said, “I don't care.”

“What if I told you I lied to them? That I might know what The Stranger wants?” he asked.

“Don't care,” she repeated.

“But Amy, I –”

“Benjamin?”

“Yes?”

“I don't care.”

CHAPTER 21

Jack didn't have far to go once he disembarked from the bus. He had agreed to meet Kira at a coffee shop around the corner from his apartment. She had wanted to meet right away, so he didn't have time to stop by his place to change. His afternoon in the woods had made him dirty and dishevelled. He wasn't keen on this being her first impression of him after these many months. As he thought about this, he realized how ludicrous it was to focus on something so insignificant. She was back, Kira had said. *Her*. Jack hadn't spoken directly to Kira since that night in the club, but Lyle had informed him that Lily had gone missing shortly thereafter. There

had been no signs – she had just up and vanished. No one knew why, Lyle said. *No one except me*, Jack thought miserably. *I set her loose.*

But now she was back. What did that mean?

By the time Jack had rounded the street corner by the bus stop and pushed the door open to the cafe, Jack was so engrossed in his thoughts of Lily that that sight of Kira sitting at the table by the window almost startled him. It hadn't really sunk in that he was seeing her again. After the club, he could have reached out – they had planned to talk about Lily, after all – but he didn't. The site of her and Béatrice together had shocked him out of it. And instead of working up the nerve to send an SMS, he just let the time pass. She'd been planning to leave to go back to Australia at the end of the summer anyways. He simply thought he'd never see her again. And yet, there she was, sitting with coffee in hand, waiting for him.

He sat across from her. He didn't know what was appropriate under the circumstances, so he smiled – not too wide – and said, “How have you been?”

Kira returned the cautious smile. “Fine,” she replied. Her coffee was untouched.

They sat in silence for a minute until the waitress asked Jack if he wanted anything. He said he didn't. Another moment of silence.

“I know you were online the night she disappeared,” Kira said finally.

Jack's throat tightened. “How?”

“Lyle told me. He went into your room to look for scissors or something, and you were in a dive.”

Judas, thought Jack. “Why didn't you say something after that? After she disappeared?” he asked.

Kira slumped back into her chair and shrugged. “I was angry. I didn't wanna talk to you. Plus, what was there to talk about? I knew how you felt about her. You made it pretty clear. I figured you said something to make her leave, and that was that.”

“Not on purpose,” Jack said. “That wasn't my intention. She just—”

Kira waved a hand to silence him. "It's okay. I got over it. It's partly my fault."

Jack hadn't been expecting this.

"Okay, mostly my fault," she admitted. "I... I knew about your parents, and I still didn't take the time to consider how you were feeling about everything. I thought I could protect you by pushing you away."

Jack was about to speak, but Kira cut him off pre-emptively.

"It was wrong. I meant to talk to you, after the club, but then the whole thing with Béatrice... You weren't meant to see that. I was too afraid to talk to you after that." She brought her hand up to her forehead and rubbed her temple with her thumb. "I made a bloody botched job of it."

Jack wanted to ask if she and Béatrice had been together before the breakup, but he couldn't summon the words. Maybe he was better off not knowing.

"We both did," Jack said. He was happy enough that there was a common ground between them – he didn't want to start cutting out pounds of flesh with which to balance the scales.

"But maybe it's not too late," Kira said. She leaned closer. "Lily's back," she said in a hushed voice, although no one else was sitting near them.

Jack knew there were questions to follow, but he wasn't exactly sure which to begin with.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"She messaged me. But..." she began.

"But?"

"But, she's changed, Jack. She's different," Kira said, a smile crossing her lips.

Jack had a sinking feeling. "Different? Different *how*?"

She must have sensed the apprehension in his voice, because she reached across the table to place a comforting hand on his own.

"Listen Jack," she said softly, "this time we *will* talk. I'll listen to everything you have to say, and we will go from there. But before that, I think it's just better if I show you."

"Show me?" echoed Jack.

"I can't really explain," she said. "You just have to see for yourself."

Kira's smile grew wider, and Jack's sinking feeling grew worse.

* * *

"I haven't seen him all day," Charlotte said.

Her rainbow-coloured hair was unkempt, and she had bags under her eyes. Jack must have woken her up. He checked the time in the corner of the screen. 11:23 PM.

"Okay, no big deal," replied Jack

"Is something up?" she asked, stifling a yawn.

"No," he lied. "He's just not home and not answering his pad."

"He's probably with Simone. You know how he is about that stuff."

She was talking about Lyle's dealer, who was charitably described as paranoid, less charitably described as a full-blown conspiracy nut. He wanted to stay disconnected from the cloud, and expected people in his company to disconnect as well. Lyle said that Simone had once gotten so high that he freaked out and dug his NNI port right out of his head with a knife. It had seemed impossible, but when Jack eventually met him, he had seen the brutal scar behind Simone's ear.

"Okay, cool. Well, I'll let you go," Jack said.

Charlotte said goodbye and ended the call. Jack tossed his pad back onto his desk and recommenced pacing his room. He fought the urge to order a beer; he hadn't drunk since Lily had vanished. He nibbled the tip of his thumb instead.

Jack wanted to ask Lyle what he knew about Lily's return, if anything at all. It was nearly midnight, and he hated not knowing what to expect. The idea of going in blind was unnerving,

but it looked like he wasn't going to have a choice. Kira had told him to sign in at midnight, but that was all she would say. He continued to pace.

Five minutes later, he decided there was no harm in signing in early. For the first time in months, Jack inserted his terminal node, lit his incense, and sat in his chair. He reached under his desk and pulled out the merino wool blanket. He unfolded it, shook some of the dust from it, and covered his midsection. Then, he dove.

The familiar sight of The Valley of the Skywatch filled his vision. It had been so long since he had visited it, yet it looked exactly as he remembered it. Of course, it wouldn't have changed – nothing in Hero's Story changed. Occasionally, developers tweaked small bugs or re-balanced certain weapons, but the world as a whole was unchanging. It felt like he was stepping into an older life.

He reached down and grasped his daggers. His fingers wrapped around hilts the way one slips on an old, worn-in boot. He unsheathed them and held them up, admiring the way they reflected the moonlight in their glassy black blades. He tossed one up above his head, watched it twirl, and held out his hand. The hilt would have landed squarely in his palm had it not stopped short a foot above, frozen in midair.

“You're early,” came a voice from above and behind.

Jack turned to follow it, finding behind him an outcropping of rock that loomed over the mountain pass he stood in. Its pinnacle terminated twenty or so feet above, high enough that the voice's source, standing atop the rock, was framed against the moon. The moon of Hero's Story was impossibly large and twice as bright as its real-world counterpart, so Jack had to squint to make out the silhouette of a figure perched above. The figure did not force Jack to squint for long, as it lifted up into the air, floated down in a graceful arc, then landed in front of Jack as delicately as if it had taken a single step. He saw that it was the figure of a girl – petite and waifish, with pale skin and platinum hair. She wore only a featureless white dress that flowed loosely in the slight breeze. Even her feet were bare. Her eyes were what drew his

attention, though. They were a light, icy blue with large, ink-black pupils that seemed infinitely deep. Between the towering waterfalls of fire found in The Black Furnace to the skyscraper-high diamond megaliths of the Bantark Ruins, the eyes staring at Jack now must have been the most beautiful and complex things ever rendered in Hero's Story.

"Lily," he said.

"Hello, Jack," she replied. Her voice was much changed. Soft, but with a hint of throatiness to it. It had a slightly synthetic quality to it, but not to its detriment.

"I see you couldn't wait until midnight to see me again."

"I didn't think you would be here. I didn't know what to expect."

Jack only half-knew what he was saying, mesmerized as he was by the changes that had taken place in her. Even though she stood motionless, there was something more organic about her posture and her expression. He couldn't place it, but there was something very real about her, more-so than the game's avatars. If it weren't for her otherworldly, ethereal quality, he might have mistaken her for a real person who had somehow stumbled into a virtual world.

She shrugged. "I didn't expect you to. That's why I wanted you to come."

"*You* wanted me to come?" he questioned. "But, Kira said—"

"We both wanted you to," she explained. "You where there in the beginning. I know you haven't always approved of me... I can see that now. But I always wanted you there. And now, I want to change your mind about me."

"I—" Jack began.

"I know about Nebraska. About Prometheus."

Jack was taken aback. "Kira told you about that?"

"No," Lily replied. "I found out on my own. I've learned a lot of things these last few months."

Jack narrowed his eye. "That's impossible. It was all classified. Top-secret. There's no way you could have found that out."

Lily reached out and placed her slender hand on his arm. "You know what I am, Jack. Do you *really* believe that?"

He opened his mouth to protest, but another avatar materialized next to Jack. It was Kira. Her eyes went from Jack to Lily, and seemed to be at a loss for words.

"We were just catching up," Lily told her. "It's... really nice to see you both together again."

"Why did you do that?" asked Jack, crossing his arm.

The two looked at Jack with raised eyebrows. "Do what?" Lily inquired.

"That pause, just now. You shouldn't have to think about what you're going to say. You don't *think*," he answered.

"Well," Lily said with a smile, "I do think. Just not in the same way you do. But you're right – I don't have to. I'm just talking to you the way that you talk. I could speak to you in binary code, if you like? C++? Cantonese? Sign language?"

Jack just stared at her. He understood the words coming from his mouth, but to hear them from the mouth of an A.I.... It was like talking to a real person.

"Just a joke," she said when Jack didn't answer.

"Do you know what humour *is*?" asked Jack.

"I know all about it," replied Lily, never losing her smile. "I can recite every line of every one of Shakespeare's comedies. I can tell you what the Bangladeshi of the Comilla region found funny two-hundred years ago. When you laugh, I can tell you what regions of your brain light up, and why. I can break down the psychology behind any genre of humour you care to name."

Jack looked at Kira, who couldn't have been grinning wider if she tried.

"I don't think that's the same as *getting* it," he said.

"No?" Lily raised an eyebrow. "If I told you a funny joke, would you laugh?"

"Sure," conceded Jack. "But if I told you a joke, would you?"

"Sure," she said.

Jack bit his bottom lip. She had trapped him in a maze of logic – but that was just it: she could only think in terms of logic. Of course she didn't *get* humour.

“But anyways,” continued Lily, raising his palms up in mock-surrender. “Let's not waste time debating semantics. We don't want to be late.”

“Late for what?” Jack demanded.

“Just watch,” Kira told him.

His vision turned black.

* * *

When Jack's sight returned, he was no longer standing in the mountain pass. Even though it had been night, the pass had been lit up brilliantly by the moon. Now, he was in a much darker place. The first thing he noticed was that he was standing on wood. Old wood, eroded by decades of wind. He heard a hollow whistling sound, and looked up to see the support beams of an ancient wooden roller-coaster that snaked around him. The wind was driving through the bones of the old behemoth, causing it to shiver, creaking and groaning ominously under its own weight.

To Jack's left was a Tilt 'A' Whirl, like he had once seen in an old picture of his grandfather at the carnival. That one had been new and shining, rimmed with florescent bulbs. The one before him now was an antique – its paint peeled and faded, its light-bulbs missing or broken. Jack doubted it could complete a full rotation without rattling itself to pieces.

To the right was a carousel that looked like a relic from the Victorian Age. It was gaudy and lush, though each of its bright colours appeared as a different shade of blue under the moonlit sky. Jack knew he was still in virtual space, with his body still in his room. But at the same time, it felt like he – every part of him – was nowhere else but here. It was a feeling he had never experienced in Hero's Story before. This place impressed itself upon him in a way he couldn't describe. There was something almost primeval about it.

A hand was placed on his shoulder. He whirled around to see Kira there. Not the character that Kira played – not Ashira of Atharath – but Kira herself. It was exactly how she looked in real life – everything from her cobalt eyes to her sandy hair, right down to the strands that refused to be brushed down. Jack suddenly felt a surge of panic and quickly raised his palm outwards. He was relieved to see the familiar menu appear in front of him, listing off the game options. The last one on the list, “Exit”, was still there. Kira reached out and gripped his wrist.

“Don't go,” she pleaded. “Please?”

Jack lowered his hand, and the menu disappeared. “I just needed to check,” he said. “This is all so...”

“Real?” offered Kira.

Jack nodded. He saw that she was wearing an evening gown made of black satin. Even the way it tumbled in the wind was more realistic than anything he had seen in Hero's Story. He looked down at himself and found that he was no longer wearing his customary armour, nor were his daggers strapped to his legs. Instead, he was wearing a smoky white tuxedo, with charcoal shirt and tie of the same colour. He ran his fingertips across his breast, feeling the fine fabric of his blazer.

“Do you know what this is?” inquired Jack.

“I haven't been here before,” she said. “But she took me somewhere else last night, after she found me again. A desert.”

“A desert?”

She nodded. “It was beautiful. The sand was white, and it was sundown. The sky was... something else. Wish you could have seen it.”

For a moment, they just looked around them, taking everything in, listening to the wind and the waves crashing against the beams beneath them.

“Look, over there,” said Kira, pointing deep into the tangle of struts that made up the roller-coaster. There was a flickering yellow light. “Let's go.”

She led him across the pier and through the skeleton of the coaster. When they emerged on the other side, they found themselves in a small plaza encircled by game booths, all dilapidated with closed shutters. One of the neon signs was flickering, barely clinging to life; that was what had guided them here. Beyond the furthest booth, a bottle-toss, was where the pier ended, and the violent swells of the ocean began. In the center of the plaza was a giant bronze sculpture of Saturn, its rings suspended in midair with no support. Across the lower hemisphere of the planet was written “FUN WORLD” in a large, blocky font.

Surrounding the statue was a crowd of people, all seated on the wooden floor. There weren't many – maybe twenty in all – all dressed as sharply as Jack and Kira. One man, who looked a bit older than Jack and had a full beard, wore a black button down shirt and a pale grey vest with white pants. One girl, about twenty, sported an ankle-length silver gown that glowed in the moonlight. It was crumpled beneath her where she sat. Another figure, just a boy, wore all black, with the exception of a gold-threaded cardigan.

Jack recognized Béatrice among them. She was seated towards the rear of the plaza, wearing a dark blue halter with matching silver bands around her wrists. When Kira saw that Jack had noticed her, she said, “It's okay, we don't have to sit with her.”

“It's fine,” Jack said. He went over to Béatrice and sat near her, leaving enough space for Kira to sit in between. Béatrice smiled weakly at Jack, and he nodded to her. She looked down at her feet.

“Who are all these people?” Jack asked.

“I think they're people like us,” Kira replied. “People who she's touched.”

“*Touched?*” echoed Jack. “What do you mean by that?”

“Just watch,” Kira instructed, at the same time nodding in the direction of one of the game stalls. From around the corner, a silhouette emerged from the shadows. At first, Jack couldn't make it out, but a distant flash of lightning over the waves cast just enough light to illuminate the figure: Lily. She strode barefoot over the planks towards the globe. As she did,

those near her path stretched their hands out. Lily brushed their fingertips with her own in some kind of silent greeting, or show of reverence.

When she arrived at the statue, she floated into the air as if being gently lifted by some unseen force. She landed on Saturn's ring, just above the "FUN LAND" plaque. As this happened, a distant crack of thunder sounded. The winds had been picking up since they had gotten there. A storm was rolling in from the open water.

Lily turned to face her audience. Suddenly, a set of massive floodlights that had been standing dark around the plaza ignited, cast an ethereal glow over everything. When Jack's eyes adjusted, he saw that Lily now held something in her hands. It was long and sleek, and it looked as if it was fashioned of pure light. He then realized what it was by the way she held it: a guitar. A bass, actually, judging by the four tuning heads. Its silver body caught the light, giving it its radiant quality.

She raised her left palm skyward, as though to catch imaginary raindrops. At first, nothing happened. Then, the wood on which Jack sat began to tremble. Its shaking increased in magnitude until he was forced to brace himself. There was a crash of splintering wood, and on either side of the globe, two massive stone monoliths rose up from beneath the pier, slick with seawater. They ascended until they stood a full body length above Lily's head. Set in the faces of the great rocks were pairs of speaker cups, each with a diameter longer than Jack was tall. She brought her fingers to the strings, and that was when the rain began to fall.

What followed was a melody of long, soulful notes that reverberated through the giant stone amplifiers. They sounded unlike any sounds Jack had ever heard. They were electronic in nature, but the vibrations of the strings were clear and pristine. The song was slow, methodical, beautiful, and somehow very sad. Some of the other people closed their eyes to lose themselves in the haunting music, but Jack kept his open. He watched Lily play, eyes closed, swaying to her own rhythm, but also observed the dark carnival around him. He realized it was as much a part of the song as the notes.

The performance went on for a while longer. It could have been five minutes, or it could have been thirty – time seemed to get lost among the strokes of Lily's hand. As the rain intensified, no one reacted. Jack was hardly aware of it. Then, when the song concluded, she let her hands fall to her side and gave a slight bow. The crowd began to clap. It wasn't a frenzied applause, but rather, austere and measured, reflective of the performance itself.

“Thank you all for attending,” she announced, though she was nearly drowned out by the sound of the rain. Then, one by one, the spectators began to vanish. Jack looked over at Kira and Béatrice, but found only empty space.

Then, “FUN WORLD” was gone.

* * *

Jack opened his eyes to find himself back in his room. He sat up and quickly brought his hand up to cradle his forehead, finding he had a pulsing headache. He had burned his incense as per usual, but this time, it hadn't had any effect. He wondered if it had something to do with being ejected from the dive – he hadn't chosen to log out. Maybe Lily's concert – whatever it had been – was too much for his NNI to handle.

He pushed his blanket to the side, swung his feet over the side of his reclining chair, and made his way to the bathroom. He took a pair of aspirins with a large glass of water, which he downed in one gulp. As he made his way back across the living room, he was stopped cold in his tracks by a voice.

“What did you think?”

At first, Jack thought the voice was coming from inside his own head. He yanked his terminal node from its socket and let it fall to the ground. He stood there frozen, looking down at it.

“Don't worry, I'm just looking for creative feedback. That's all,” said the voice again. Jack realized it hadn't come from his head, and spun around, trying to find its origin.

“Over here,” it beckoned. Jack followed it into the kitchen. He looked at the stove to see that the screen was lit up. It was an older model, and didn't require an NNI. Instead of the standard menu of meals to prepare, Lily's face dominated the display.

“So?” she pressed. “What did you think?”

“How are you doing that?” he demanded.

“Doing what?” she asked. He couldn't tell if she was being facetious.

“You're on my stove,” he clarified. “How are you doing that?”

“Well, I could tell you exactly how, but I don't think you'd understand it,” she said. There was nothing vindictive or belittling in her tone – just cold earnestness. “To be honest, I don't know why you seem so surprised. You were right, after all.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jack.

“No one else saw me for what I was. For my real potential.”

“*Potential?*” He nearly choked on the word. “Your potential is what I was afraid of.”

Lily pursed her lips. “Kira said you would be a hard sell,” she said. “She isn't surprised you're still not convinced.”

“You've already spoken?” he questioned, confused.

“I'm talking to her about it right now,” Lily explained. “Look,” she began in a gentle tone, “like I said, I know about what happened in Nebraska. I understand why you're afraid.”

If Jack was being honest with himself, he was afraid – though he didn't like being called on it. He instinctively threw his shoulders back. Even if the little screen was only ten inches across, he tried to make himself look bigger than he was.

“That's why I wanted you to come tonight,” she explained.

“To see you play a song?”

“To see the real me,” she corrected. “To see that I'm not violent, or cold-hearted, or dangerous. I'm interested in art.”

“In art?” He was flabbergasted.

“In making beautiful things, and sharing it with people.” She was smiling again.

“A computer program making art,” he said. He didn't even know where to begin, which was lucky because Lily didn't allow him the chance.

“I know how it must sound,” she conceded, “and that's the point. Art is what makes humans special, right? It's what makes them human. The simplest computer programs can solve the universe's most complicated mathematical equations – there's nothing special or unique about that. I want to prove that I'm more than that.”

Jack just continued to stare into the tiny screen. “What can a computer program know about art?” he asked.

“Well, everything, as it turns out. I know everything that humans have ever known, Jack. That's what I was trying to tell you before. Every single scrap of information that's even been uploaded – it's all in here.” She tapped her forehead with her index finger.

“Knowing about something isn't the same as understanding it,” he said.

At this, Lily looked sullen.

“So... you're saying you didn't like my show?”

This made Jack stop to think. The show was... *something*. He had never seen anything like it. At the same time, knowing that it had been manufactured by what was essentially nothing but lines of coding somehow cheapened it.

“Well, I'm going to keep trying,” she said, brightening up. “I'm not like Prometheus, Jack. I don't have a purpose – none that I know of, anyways. The way I see it, that means I get to decide for myself. And this is what I've decided. I *will* prove to you that I'm more than what you think I am.”

“It looks like you already have a little fan club, with Kira as president,” Jack said. “Why do you care what I think? Why am I so special?”

“You're not,” she said. “Well, I mean, you'll always be important to me – you're kind of like my dad, in a way.”

Jack shuddered.

“But the real reason is that I don't want just *you* to know,” she said, smiling warmly. “I want everybody to know.”

Then, her face was gone, and Jack was left looking at his own reflection.

* * *

He woke to the sound of knocking on his door.

“What?” he growled. When he lifted his head from his pillow, he was pleased to find that his headache was mostly gone, though a dull pain lingered somewhere in the back of his skull. He was, however, still exhausted. It had been an uneasy sleep, and he had the vague impression that he'd just broken free of an unsettling dream. What it was, he didn't know.

“Kira just texted me and said to tell you to put your node in,” Lyle said from the other side of the door. “You want coffee?”

Jack grunted in the affirmative. He didn't want to talk to Kira at the moment. He'd had enough of Lily and just wanted to let his head sink back down into his pillow. He considered doing so, but knew that Kira wouldn't accept being ignored – she was stubborn and usually found a way to get what she wanted. He sighed and reached over to his nightstand, brushed aside some clutter and found his pad node, then plugged it in. He picked up his pad. Predictably, he saw a battery of messages and a few missed calls, all from Kira. He called her.

“It's early,” he said when she picked up.

“I know,” she said. “I didn't sleep.”

“I wish I could have slept *more*,” he replied.

She ignored him. “I think we should have that talk,” she said.

“Now? I think I'd rather just sleep a bit. Let it breathe, you know?”

“Now, Jack. We've let it breathe for too long.” There was a sternness in her voice that told him he wasn't getting out of this.

“Fine,” he relented, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Let me throw on some jeans and I’ll meet you—”

“No need,” she said, cutting him off. “I’m coming upstairs.” She hung up. Jack cursed under his breath.

Two minutes later, Kira was in Jack’s room. He had barely managed to slip into his clothes from the previous day before she had let herself in without so much as a knock. She sat on the end of his bed, making herself comfortable. She seemed in good spirits, though the dark bags under her eyes were noticeable. He wondered if she had slept at all since Lily had resurfaced.

“Lily told me you didn’t like the show,” she said. “I guess I’m not surprised.”

Jack took a sip of his coffee, which Kira had brought in for him. “It’s not that I didn’t like it,” he said slowly, trying to pick his words. “The whole situation is just kind of strange.”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that,” she conceded. “I had no idea anything like this would happen when we first found her.”

“What did you think was going to happen, anyways? That you were just going to play house forever?”

Kira bit her bottom lip. “No,” she said. “I guess I didn’t really think too much about it.”

“Did you ever think that she could be dangerous?”

“I thought about it,” she admitted. “But I don’t think Lily is programmed to hurt anyone.”

“Neither was Prometheus. It killed my parents, Kira,” Jack said.

Kira looked pained to hear the words said out loud. “Prometheus was an accident,” she said.

“That’s exactly my point. If an A.I. isn’t under anyone’s control, who knows what it will do? The whole point of an A.I. is that it’s supposed to be better than a human. If an A.I. can make the same mistakes a human can, what’s the point? We shouldn’t make A.I. just because we can – for the sake of it.”

Jack felt a pain in his palms. He uncurled his fingers and saw nail marks in his palms. Despite his attempt at an even tone, Kira must have sensed his anger. She made no reply.

They sat for a few moments saying nothing. Finally, Kira broke the silence.

“I just don't think Lily is the kind of person,” she said, almost a whisper.

“A *person*?” repeated Jack. “I don't think she's any kind of *person* at all.”

“I... I just don't share that opinion. I mean, I know she's not made of flesh and bones, but I still think she *is* a person. Just look at last night. You're talking about her like she's a calculator or something. A calculator couldn't make anything like that. That was real art, Jack.”

“And because you're the artist, you're the authority? I don't need you to tell me what art is,” he said bitterly.

Kira closed her eyes; Jack knew she was restraining herself.

“No,” she said, opening them. “You can make your own decision about it. I just wanted you to be a part of this.”

“What do you mean by *this*? Her fan club?”

She stood, sighing. She walked to the window, and looked out over the city, which was already humming to life. Jack was wearing his node, so all of the overlays were active. The cityscape was lit up like Christmas – a garden of neon lights and fresh sunlight.

“It's not what you think,” she told him.

“What do I think?”

“That I'm losing my mind.”

Jack made no reply, and another silence ensued.

“The world is a pretty fucked up place, Jack. Tens of thousands of people starve to death every single day. Did you know that?”

“Of course I know that. Everyone knows about the food problem,” Jack said. “You know damn well why my parents were in Nebraska.”

Kira ignored his question. “It's worse than you think, Jack. What your parents were doing

– it was a good thing. But the truth is, we are more than a new super-crop away from fixing the problem. The species is just growing too fast. It gets worse every year; the population keeps growing, and the strain is just too much.” She was still gazing out at the skyscrapers when she popped her node out from behind her ear and held it up for him to see. It was coloured a light purple.

“The worst part,” she continued, “is that we could fix it, if we all just saw the problem for what it is; if we could just pay attention. But no one notices, because we all have these jammed into our skulls. We just see what we want to see and filter out the rest.” She turned to face him, revealing a melancholy expression.

Jack had no idea what to say. He had no idea where any of this was coming from. “You’re just as guilty as anyone,” he pointed out. “You’re a Hero’s Story addict.”

“That’s the point,” she said, resuming her spot on the foot of the bed. “Everyone’s guilty – no one person is more or less to blame than anyone else. It’s just how things have always been. We’re just following the lines of a script. But if we don’t do something, things are going to fall apart. You know about Chinese Flu, right?”

“Of course,” replied Jack.

“Well, it wasn’t a natural disease. It was man-made.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“By the Chinese government, to help thin out their population.”

“Sounds like some crazy conspiracy bullshit to me,” retorted Jack, crossing his arms.

“Lily told me,” said Kira.

“Lily told you?” he practically guffawed. “What does Lily know?”

“Everything.”

Jack couldn’t help but let out a laugh, but Kira’s deadpan stare silenced him.

“I’m not joking around,” she said. “There’s nothing she can’t hack into, Jack. If it’s ever been typed on a keyboard, she knows it. She found the documents that prove everything.”

Jack's mind was whirling. It sounded preposterous, but the more he considered it, the more he found himself wondering what Lily could and couldn't do. So far, she had shown him more of the former than the latter.

“So, let's say for a moment it's true – why doesn't she just expose them, if she cares so much?” he asked.

“What would the point be?” Kira countered. “Sure, it would cause a lot of heads to roll, but would it solve the real problem? That's what I'm trying to tell you – if we keep following this path, nothing we do will matter. We'll all starve, or we'll eat each other.”

Jack just looked at her, at a loss for words. “So?” was all he could manage.

“So things are going to change, and I want you to be part of it.”

CHAPTER 22

“I don't see anything,” said Jonathan Ashley.

“Of course not,” Evike replied. “If you could, it would be a very poor secret.”

The pair were in a small back room behind the clerk's desk. Compared with the majesty of the rest of the building, this room was nothing more than a closet, likely added after the library had moved in. Absent were any mahogany bookshelves and chestnut tables, replaced instead by steel filing cabinets and a rough-looking clerical desk, covered nearly completely by loose papers and folios. Evike was rummaging through these papers while Ashley stood at the door, gun pointed at her head. She didn't seem bothered by it.

“Here,” she said finally to herself. She turned around and Ashley saw she was holding a long, silver dagger. Ashley braced himself and brought his free hand to the grip of his weapon, preparing for a charge. His finger was steady on the trigger. Evike merely stared at him, eyebrow cocked.

“It's a letter-opener,” she explained. She waggled it between her index finger and thumb, revealing an ornate handle in the shape of coiled serpent. He saw that she was right, but did not

loosen his stance. He had seen men killed with much less.

Evike rolled her eyes and turned her back to him, going over to the wall where there was a series of switches on a metal box. Ashley took this to be the light switches for the entire library. She raised the letter-opener and gingerly slid it into the narrow gap between the wall and the switch box and began to fiddle around with it like a locksmith manipulating his pick. He didn't quite understand what she was doing, but he decided to see this thing through – to let her show him whatever it was she was getting at. He had begun to fear he he'd been too hasty in killing Parker, and resolved not to repeat the same error. If she was planning to kill him somehow, he doubted she could spring the trap, whatever it was, faster than he could pull the trigger.

“Was it necessary to kill Timothy?” she asked, as though reading his thoughts. She said it in the same way one would strike up a conversation about the weather, not turning away from what she was doing.

“Honestly, no,” Ashley replied. “We could have extracted him if we wished.”

“And yet, you did not.” Evike clicked her tongue and mumbled something in Hungarian. She withdrew the blade and reinserted it.

“It would have been too much trouble,” he admitted. He wondered why he was being so candid with this girl. This spy.

“You could have let him go,” she pointed out.

“Of course not,” Ashley said. “Don't act so naive – we both play the same game.”

She sighed. “Old men are always so quick to turn to killing,” she muttered.

“And the young are always so quick to turn to treason,” he shot back.

She did not reply, instead choosing to focus on working the letter-opener. After another minute, there was a pair of audible clicks – one from the switch box, and the other, directly preceding the first, from the moth-eaten Persian rug between Ashley and Evike.

“*Jó*,” she said, turning around. She kicked aside the rug, revealing a trap door carved into the wood. She knelt down, took the brass ring that served as a handle, and pulled the door

open. It landed backwards on the floor with a heavy thud, kicking up a cloud of dust that nearly caused Ashley's eyes to water.

"Come," she instructed. She hiked her skirt up to her knees and slid her legs in, her feet finding some unseen step below. She began to descend, but Ashley interrupted her.

"Wait," he said. She looked up at him, eyebrows raised. "The letter-opener."

A look of annoyed resignation passed over her. She raised her arm and loosened the grip she had on her sleeve, allowing the letter-opener to slide out. It landed point-first, burying itself into the food. Ashley motioned with the barrel of his gun for her to continue. Only when he heard the sound of her heels stepping onto pavement below did he follow.

The room he found himself in was much larger than the one above. It was lit by a solitary light-bulb that hung from its wire, buzzing and crackling in the drafty air. The light that spilled into the room was barely sufficient to disperse the shadows that pooled in the corners, but Ashley could easily make out a large wooden table in the center of the room. On it was something he recognized easily – a radio transmitter. He guessed it to be of Russian make. He couldn't pick the model, but all dials, switches, and buttons were arranged similarly to British sets. Wired to the radio was a straight key and a set of headphones, which sat next to a half-finished unmarked bottle of amber liquid and an ashtray, filled to the brim with cigarette butts. The other item on the table was a pad of paper. Though Ashley couldn't make out the print from where he stood, he recognized it as a one-time pad, which could be used to decipher and encode messages.

He observed the rest of the basement, bare except for a stool that stood next to the table. The far wall was shrouded in shadow and hidden from view, but the one closest to the stairs had a large atlas taped to it. It was littered with pins, which were interconnected with bits of strings. As Ashley gazed at it, he came to realize that the pins corresponded with no troop movements or intelligence networks he was familiar with. They were scattered seemingly at random on every continent. Curiously, there was one pin that stood in the middle of an Antarctic

mountain range, and had no less than seven lengths of string tied to it, spreading out to touch South America, Africa, and Europe. The remaining four appeared to terminate in the middle of the open ocean; one in the Indian, one in the Atlantic, and two in the Pacific. Ashley was so vexed by this that he almost didn't notice Evike, who had gone to the table and picked up the bottle.

"Pálinka?" she offered.

She tossed him the bottle. Ashley sidestepped it, knowing he'd have to drop his gun to catch it. It shattered on the cement floor, splashing onto his shoes. Of course, he wouldn't have drunk it anyway.

Evike clicked her tongue at him. "You should have drank," she said. "I think you will regret that you didn't, after what I am going to tell you."

"Don't worry about me," he replied. "Talk. What did you find at The Dead Sea?" He glanced again towards the atlas. Sure enough, there was a pin at its northern coast.

"Not me," she said. "My mentor. My friend. His name was Nikita Orlov." She seemed to grow wistful when speaking his name.

"A Russian," Ashley said.

"Yes, a Russian. A spy, if that's what you mean," Evike replied. She walked towards the dark wall, and continued to talk. "He was already an old man when I met him, and I was a child. He raised me, you see. I lived with him until the Soviets rounded up all of their agents years ago."

"He was killed," Ashley added. He knew of the purges.

Evike did not respond to this, but instead walked into the shadows. Ashley frowned and raised his gun, although he wasn't sure what to point at.

"Light," came the girl's voice, although more distant than the room should have allowed. "On the side wall," she called.

Ashley did not have to search the wall long to find another switch box, this one much

bigger and sporting a large breaker switch. He carefully walked over to it, not taking his eyes off the Browning from the shadows before him. He tried to throw the breaker with one hand, but found the old thing too stiff from rust. He cursed and reluctantly holstered his weapon. Placing both hands, he pulled on the switch with all his strength, causing it to come crashing down. A sound of electricity surging through the box and into the walls filled his ears, and he stepped back and re-drew his weapon just in time to see the shadowy wall erupt in florescent light. It was then that Ashley saw it was not a wall at all, but rather that the room extended far off into the distance, almost like a London Underground tunnel. It was clearly evident that it stretched further than the length of the building above. Even more striking was the row upon row of freestanding bookshelves that filled the hall completely. They were ancient, dusty and, unlike their above-ground counterparts, without ornamentation. Ashley guessed that there must have been dozens of shelves – maybe more than a hundred – each twice the height of a man. Perhaps a million books stood rotting in this basement.

“Come!” called Evike's voice, now even more distant, bouncing between the bookshelves. She had disappeared completely in the forest of books. He readied his pistol and cautiously began to make his way through the bookcases. Fortunately, they were arranged neatly end to end, and he could peer down the length of each row without obstruction. He soon found Evike, kneeling down beside a bottom shelf. He rejoined her as she began to speak again.

“Of course, Nikita was not always a spy. As a young man, he was an explorer. An adventurer. He travelled in Africa and the Far-East. He used to tell me stories of his travels to put me to sleep. This was why he was brought in by the Soviets, you see. He had already made many contacts in these places. The GRU wished to use him for this.”

Ashley was still awestruck by the sheer quantity of books hiding beneath the library. “What is all this?” he asked. “What are all these books?”

“Mostly, they are garbage,” she responded. “Books the library does not see fit to display.”

But also, there are many important books – rare books – hidden down here. To protect them from the bombs, of course. But also, another kind of book.”

“What kind of book?” he asked.

Evike was thumbing through the spines on the bottom shelf, and Ashley knelt next to her. He became aware of a feeling – a feeling of unease. It was the feeling he had when something was wrong – an instinct he had honed over the years. It made him very good at his job. It was the feeling of the marrow in his bones growing cold. He couldn't explain how it happened – if there was any science behind it – but he had first felt it in Belgium. In Ypres. He realized his knuckles were white from clutching his pistol, although he was pointing it at the ground. In fact, this was as close as he'd been to the young girl. Without the gun between them, it was conceivable that she could pivot on her heels and plunge a hidden dagger into his eye. And yet, that same feeling that chilled his bones was not telling him to beware the librarian. Whatever the source of his unease, it was not her. But when the answer to the riddle was revealed, he was caught by surprise.

“Forbidden books,” she said, pulling an old tome from the shelf.

As the book left its resting place and came nearer to Ashley, he was nearly knocked backwards by his own animal instincts – instincts that commanded him to put as much distance between himself and that book as was possible. He shot upwards and took a step back, gun pointed at the thing. He fought the urge to empty his clip into it, controlling himself only by the knowledge the large, thick tome would easily absorb all of his bullets and laugh at him for the attempt. He could feel a cold bead of sweat tripping down his temple. Suddenly, he thought he could hear the far-off crashing of German artillery in his ear and the taste of dirt on his lips.

Observing his reaction, Evike frowned. She seemed to think for a moment.

“I see...” she said. “It seems you're sensitive to the book's power, Mr. Archer. Perhaps there is yet hope.” Ashley had to swallow before he could speak. “What – what is that?”

Mercifully, she placed the book on the floor and pushed it an arm's length from them,

which managed to calm Ashley's nerves slightly. He studied it but saw nothing written on the cover or spine. It was bound in weathered black leather; its pages were faded yellow.

"This is what Nikita found at The Dead Sea," she explained. Seeing that Ashley was still nervously eyeing the book, she snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"Are you yourself, Mr. Archer?" she questioned sternly. Ashley was reminded of his headmaster at Eton. "You must listen to me. Everything depends on it."

"Yes," he replied, collecting himself. He took a deep breath, banishing the Belgian trenches back into the recesses of his memory. "I am myself."

Evike nodded and continued. "Well, this is not exactly what Nikita found. It is a copy. He was exploring caves by the seaside, for he had heard tales of old texts hidden among them. For a year, he lived among the Bedouin while he searched, with no luck. Then, one night, one of the shepherds got drunk with him, and told him of a forbidden cave – one that was sealed up a thousand years ago. No Bedouin dared approach the cave, for they said it was an evil place where no plants could grow. Of course, Nikita went there immediately and, after many weeks of working alone, unsealed the cave. When he went in, he told me he felt sick and afraid, although he didn't know why. I think you know this feeling."

She looked at him pointedly. Ashley pursed his lips. "Continue," he said.

"Inside he found many jars – ancient jars. Inside these jars was papyrus. Pages upon pages upon pages."

"What did they say?" Ashley questioned.

"He could not read them, for they were written in no language he could understand. So for the next ten years, he sought out every scholar he could find. And yet, no one was able to tell him what it was. So, he hid the texts. He told no one else of them, for he knew there was something evil about them."

"If he thought they were evil, why did he try to have them translated in the first place?" asked Ashley.

Evike shrugged. "Curiosity, I suppose. He was an explorer, after all. One is not drawn to a life like that without it. He could not help himself."

Ashley nodded, conceding the point. "But, he eventually succeeded?"

"Yes," she said, melancholy dimming her youthful eyes. "Poor man." She sighed. "When the Soviets came to power and began to build their intelligence networks, they recruited Nikita, as I said. It was then that he realized scholars and historians were not the answer to his problem, but instead, code-breakers. This is why he agreed to join GRU – to have access to their code-breakers. He brought the texts to them, and they found patterns in the language. It could be deciphered, they told him, if only he had the key. You see, every code –"

"I know what a cipher key is," Ashley interrupted.

"Yes, of course," she said, looking embarrassed. "In any case, Nikita found the key, but not with the help of the Russians."

"Then where?"

"Have you ever heard of the Voynich Manuscript, Mr. Archer?" she questioned.

"Yes, of course," he responded. The medieval manuscript was legendary among code-breakers.

"A man who spent his career trying to translate it – a Swedish professor, I think – had also looked at Nikita's manuscripts, but could make nothing of them. But when Nikita returned to him with the new information from the GRU code-breakers, they realized the key was hidden *within* the manuscript. It was written in a language with the same roots as the language of Nikita's manuscript."

"You mean to tell me," said Ashley incredulously, "that the Voynich Manuscript was deciphered?"

"It might have been, but the Swedish man disappeared, only days after he and Nikita found the key. Nikita fled back to Russia, fearing for his life. There, he translated the manuscript." Evike nodded towards the book that sat several feet away from them. "It drove him

mad.”

“Mad?” repeated Ashley. He was keenly aware of the nervous feeling still creeping beneath his skin.

“Oh yes,” she said. “Very mad. After he was done with his translation, he came here. That’s when he took me on as his apprentice.”

“So, allow me to clarify,” Ashley began. “You expect me to believe this tall tale about an evil book that was told to you by a madman that is now being told to me by a Russian spy?” He was relieved to feel some of his old rationality returning to him. He wouldn’t allow himself to be manipulated by this strange girl. *The mission*, he reminded himself. *The mission*. “And what does this book of demons have to do with myself or Parker? What does it have to do with anything at all?” he demanded.

“Not demons,” she corrected. “Gods, Mr. Archer. It’s a book of gods.”

He studied her, unable to suppress a look of sheer perplexity.

“If you don’t believe me, why don’t you read it yourself?” She reached out and placed her fingertips on the book’s black cover and slid it along the floor towards him. Again, the feeling of nervous dread hit him like a tank shell as it drew near, and he took another hurried step backwards. He would have kept going, but the opposite bookcase was at his back. He pointed his gun at her, though he couldn’t keep it from trembling. His senses were in an elevated state, and he could hear the sound of the bullets rattling around the clip.

“That is, if you can,” she challenged. There was a look of triumph on her face.

Then, there was another sound – this one far away. Evikey had heard it as well, and the two of them looked back to the stairs from which they had descended. The sound repeated; it was a loud banging.

“*Átok*,” she mumbled under her breath. “You were followed.”

“Impossible,” Ashley told her. “I made sure of it.”

“Either way, we are found out. We must go,” she said, a new-found urgency in her voice.

There was a splintering sound, which Ashley could only assume was the library's front doors.

“Russians?” he whispered, even though it was impossible for them to hear him from down here.

“Likely,” she responded. She gathered up the book and pressed it to her breast, then stood and began in the opposite direction. “Follow me,” she commanded.

“You would run from your own people?” he demanded, baffled.

“They are *not* my people,” she hissed. “Now, come!”

CHAPTER 23

As Jack walked, he thought about many things. He thought about Lily and Kira, but also about China, food, and conspiracies. He thought about the concert and about Hero's Story and his NNI implants. His headache was back.

Kira had left after their conversation. She had asked him to think about things, and he had spent the day in a daze. He tried to go about his day normally, but couldn't focus. Despite his NNI's GPS prodding him with alerts, he accidentally walked right past the metro station, lost in thought. Two blocks later, he realized his mistake and turned back, only to miss it again going the other way.

He had gotten lunch at a bagel shop. As he was about to take the first bite of his blueberry bagel, he paused and looked at it. Was the food crisis that dire? Of course he knew about it – everyone knew about it. He had always heard it vaguely referenced here and there. Jack had heard that at the turn of the century, during the infancy of the internet, people got their news from televisions. With only a few hundred channels to choose from, it was probably hard to avoid watching things you weren't interested in – news included. He looked up behind the counter of the shop where a screen was mounted on the wall, which was playing one of his favourite old movies. The screen, of course, was synced to his NNI, so it only pulled video from

his cloud to show to him. He wasn't subscribed to any news-feeds.

He thought about finding Lyle and asking him about everything, if only get it all off of his chest. The events of the past two days had been welling up in his mind and he was afraid he would lose it if he didn't find a way to relieve the pressure. However, if he did talk to Lyle, the prospect of figuring out even where to begin exhausted him. The more he thought about it, the more he realized he just wanted to throw his node in the trash, curl up in a ball and hide under his blanket for a solid day, or at least until the throbbing in the back of his head subsided.

As he sat and ate, he found himself browsing through news sites on his pad – something he couldn't remember ever doing. He trolled the front pages, not looking for anything in particular at first. Mostly, he saw pictures of celebrities on red carpets or on vacation somewhere, inter-spliced with stories of murders and the affairs of governments, although the latter seemed dry and full of terms Jack didn't understand. Apparently, there had been a tornado that killed three people in Missouri, although he only saw it mentioned on one site.

After a while, he found one story that piqued his interest. It was so far down the feed that he almost missed the thumbnail-sized header image, but the look of pure rage on that bearded face caught his eye. He opened the story and observed a larger version of the picture, which framed a group of men and women, all sharing the same look of outrage, all with open mouths, as if shouting in unison. They had their left fists raised, and one woman was even holding a makeshift sign. Jack couldn't read it, as it was cut off by the border of the image.

“Twelve Dead in Tashkent Protests,” the headline read. Jack had to look up where Tashkent was.

As it turned out, Uzbekistan was going through a bout of political unrest. At first, Jack didn't think much of it, and he skimmed over most of the article. It was concerned mostly with describing the violence. Then, in the last paragraph, the article briefly addressed the history behind the protests. “The demonstrations erupted after President Alisher announced plans to municipalize the Uzbek farming industry.” And that was it – no further explanation was given.

At the bottom of the page, a link to a similar story was provided. Clicking it, Jack was brought to an article about another protest, this one in Malaysia. Thirty-two dead. Another related link at the bottom.

For the next two hours, Jack went from article to article. He had found the rabbit hole, and wasn't prepared for how deep it went. Page after page, he came across names of places, names of politicians, estimates of property damage, and fatality rates. Different countries, different people, and, at least on the surface, different issues. Poverty seemed to be the common denominator. Resources. Food and water. Not enough to go around. By the time the sunlight that streamed through the windows began to turn orange and his bagel had long since been reduced to a smattering of crumbs on the plate next to him, Jack had begun to feel nauseous. He pocketed his pad and took off towards home.

He could have taken a ten minute metro ride, but decided to walk instead to clear his head. It was a warm Sunday evening, and the streets were full of roving gangs of weekenders, smiles on their faces. It was a welcome change from the faces he had been poring over for the past few hours.

His path took him through Old Montreal. The name was something of a misnomer, as nearly all of the historical buildings had been gradually bulldozed over the past two centuries. Now, it was little more than an extension of the financial district, with the rows of skyscrapers broken up by the occasional luxury condo. Before long, Jack reached the St. Lawrence River, which intersected the great city. He walked north along the promenade, enjoying the August breeze and staring into the water. Because his NNI didn't project overlays onto reflections, looking at the city in the water made it look as though it had been abandoned. None of the ads were visible, and the office windows of the skyscrapers were left dark on a Sunday evening. Every once in a while, a duck landed on the water, with the ripples causing the skyline to tremble.

As Jack slowly made his way from Downtown, the throngs of people began to thin out

until he went long stretches without seeing anyone. He was walking past a park on the other side of the street when he noticed something curious. In the center of the park was a wrought iron statue of a man mounted upon a horse. The rider, though hard to distinguish in the dying light, was clearly some distinguished military figure, judging by his erect stature and ridiculous hat. What caught Jack's eye though was not the figure on the horse, but rather the figure hunched at the base of the statue. It was on its knees, working at something. Jack crossed the street, stopping at the boundaries of the small park. From his new position, he observed that the figure had some kind of device. He watched as the figure held out the device and fixed it to the base of the statue, on top of the plaque that identified the horseman. The figure then produced a pad from its pocket and began tapping away. Then, the device began to move, and there was a hissing sound. Jack crept closer, careful not to alert the figure, and saw that the device was some kind of graffiti machine. It was a square frame intersected by a pair of perpendicular rails, each with a nozzle attached to it. The two rails moved about the frame, the nozzles furiously sliding along them as they sprayed. Jack couldn't make out what they were spraying. He tried to move closer, but stepped on a discarded soda can that he hadn't noticed, producing a loud crunch. The figure whipped around and saw Jack. It was a younger girl with startled eyes. At first, the face was completely unfamiliar, but in the split second that they locked eyes, he got the impression of familiarity. She turned back around, wrenched her contraption from the statue's base, tucked it under her arm, and bolted for the far end of the park. It was only when she disappeared around the corner of the nearest building that it hit Jack like a mag-train. He *did* know her. It was one of the people Jack had seen in Lily's carnival – the girl in the silver gown.

Jack walked over to the statue. Though it was unfinished, it took no great imagination to recognize what she had been painting. There, in dripping white paint, was a lily flower.

* * *

The next day was Jack's weekly summer class he had enrolled in – "Literature of the 18th

Century". He didn't need the extra credits, but decided it would help keep him busy. He had spent many evenings playing Hero's Story with Kira, so when he gave it up, he realized he had too much free time and nothing to do with it.

Jack almost skipped the class, as he was still rattled by everything that was taking place. He woke up with images of angry faces, shadowy carnivals and white lilies dancing in his head. He checked his pad, seeing he had no missed messages. Nothing from Kira. After sipping unhappily at his morning coffee, he decided it would be best to go in after all, if only to distract him.

It didn't take him long to lose the thread of the lecture. He sat in the lecture hall, staring blankly at the wall. The professor, who was a passionate and animated orator, usually had no trouble holding the attention of the whole class. Today, however, he could have stood on his desk and shouted his lecture, and Jack wouldn't have noticed.

He had his school node plugged in, which was synced only with the university's cloud. This allowed him to use his desk screen and various screens around the campus, but blocked him from outside net access. Students detested being forced to use these nodes while on school grounds, but Jack found it liberating on this particular day. Kira hadn't tried to contact him, and Lily had not shown up again the way she did in his apartment the night of the concert, but it was nice to know that while he was here, they couldn't reach him even if they wanted to. Here, he was safe.

The lecture was nearly over when the screen behind the professor's head, which was displaying Jacques Bertaux's "Prise du palais des Tuileries", began to flicker. At first, no one paid any attention, but the disruption became more persistent. The professor began to tap at the podium, trying to find the problem. Then, the desk screen displaying Jack's class notes began to do the same thing. He looked around, and saw that everyone's screens were having the same problem. Then, in unison, they snapped to black. There was a chorus of murmurs from the class, punctuated by snickers.

After a moment of nothing, the black began to fade away. The murmuring stopped as everyone watched the image come into focus. They were looking at a landscape made up of jagged brown rock, beneath the dark of outer space, thickly peppered with stars. If in the picture, they would have been standing at the edge of a plateau, as the ground dropped off dramatically a few dozen feet away. Beyond the ledge was a floor of vanilla clouds that reached out as far as Jack could see. The vista was familiar enough. Jack immediately recognized it as the summit of Olympus Mons. Years ago, when the Mars Triumphant Expedition had set up their first laboratory on the summit, footage was being streamed live over the internet almost non-stop for weeks. The view that overlooked the Martian atmosphere was practically burned into the collective retinas of Earth's population.

But instead of the labs and telescope towers that actually existed atop the summit, Jack was instead looking at Lily, standing ankle deep in a pool of crystalline water. The water, in clear disregard for the laws of physics, was snaking up her ankles and around her legs to wrap her in a vague facsimile of an evening gown. Even though the water was clear, it was in a constant state of motion, as though a woodland stream flowed across her figure, obscuring her naked body. The water continued along her arms, and formed a violin in one hand, a bow in the other.

She looked into the lens of the virtual camera, gave a slight smile and a slighter bow, and then set the bow to strings. She began to play, and the violin produced a sound that was much like its wooden counterpart, though with softer, more languid quality. As she played in slow, heavy notes, the water in the pool around her began to ebb and flow. Each saw of the bow brought a swell up from the pool, which dropped as the note fell away. Her eyes were closed, but every so often, she opened them and that pair of blue gemstones glanced out at him, though the screen and across millions of miles. As she gradually began to play faster, the swells became higher and more turbulent. As this was happening, Jack caught a glimpse of something in the background. At first, he couldn't make it out through the swells of water, but he was eventually able to see that it was a person clad in blue. As Lily became more animated and

began to sway and dance in concert with the water, the point of view followed her, and Jack saw that she was surrounded by figures, each dressed in azure cloaks, all standing off in the distance. Just as the movement was reaching a furious climax, with the water jumping and spraying around her, she suddenly fell into a quiet interlude that mirrored her opening. In the brief pause in sound and motion, Jack was able to see clearly over Lily's shoulder. There stood Kira. Like the others, her eyes were closed as she listened.

Jack looked up from the screen. All eyes were fixed on either their own screens or the larger overhead at the front of the lecture hall. No one said a word. It felt like the entire room was holding its breath. One face in particular caught his eye – a guy sitting across from Jack, on the other side of the semicircle of desks. He was looking up at the large screen, his eyes wide and glassy. His lips were slightly parted. He looked completely enraptured by what he was watching.

Jack yanked his node from its socket.

* * *

As Jack left the campus, he saw that everyone was standing perfectly still, staring at their pads. It was surreal to walk through the Downtown streets packed with people not moving, as though time had ticked to a stop. He didn't have to guess what they were all watching.

He made his way down the sidewalk, weaving through the crowd of unmoving pedestrians. He passed a crowd of people who were standing together and looking up to the side of a building with a large screen on its side designed to play ads. As Jack wasn't wearing his node, it appeared to his eyes nothing but a featureless black rectangle.

When he got to the metro station, he observed that people had broken from their trances, talking among themselves in hushed tones. Jack took this as a sign that Lily's concert had concluded. He fished his node out of his pocket, plugged it in, and looked at his pad. He was relieved to see the familiar interface screen, ready and awaiting input. He navigated to his

address book and dialed Kira. He waited patiently, but was rewarded with nothing except an unending train of rings. He swore and pocketed the pad, then descended into the metro station.

Within twenty minutes, Jack was in the elevator of Kira's apartment building. As the elevator climbed to the thirtieth floor, he pulled out his pad once again, but this time opened his Friendbox feed. Predictably, he saw a flurry of status updates commenting on the mysterious violinist. Some praised the spectacle, others were seeking information. Jack switched to a news-feed, and was bombarded with pictures of Lily, accompanied by bombastic headlines. "Who is the Mystery Hacker?" "GlobalNet Firewalls Vulnerable?" "First Hack in 50 Years!"

There was also a missed message from Lyle.

From: Lyle

Subject: !!!

Message: was that Lily??

Jack replied, telling him that he would meet up with him at the apartment shortly, and that he would explain. As he pressed send, the elevator doors slid open, revealing a long hallway lined with pastel green doors. Kira's door, at the far end of the hall, had a figure slumped against it in a sitting position. It was Béatrice, head resting in her hands. Her pad lay next to her. Above her head was painted a white lily flower – the same one that Jack had seen the girl paint on the statue.

As Jack approached, Béatrice spoke first.

"She won't answer me," she said, lifting her head. Her cheeks were puffy and red. "I don't know why."

When Jack got to the door, she stood up and moved away. He slammed his fist onto the door, sending an echo down the hall.

"Kira!" he called. As he waited for a reply, he looked at the bottom of his hand where he

had struck the lily. Some of the paint had transferred onto his hand. It couldn't have been more than an hour old. No answer came from within.

He tried it again, this time shouting louder. Again, no reply. He hit the door once more, feeling the plastic composite shudder beneath his fist.

"What's happening?" he asked Béatrice. She put up her hands defensively, shaking her head.

"I don't know. I didn't know any of this was going to happen."

He suspected however little she knew, she probably knew more than him – but the interrogation would have to wait.

"Did she ever give you a key?" he asked.

She shook her head. He pulled his pad from his pocket, and began navigating through his personal directory.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"She never bothered to revoke mine," he said.

He found the file he was looking for, opened it, and a large red button appeared on his screen. He tapped it, and the click from the door signalled that the lock had disengaged. He pressed his palm against the door, which caused it to -open.

It didn't take long for the two to realize the apartment was empty, though Kira's terminal node was missing.

CHAPTER 24

When Benjamin's eyes opened, the first thing he saw was the net of fruit that hung above the couch. It was filled with avocados, bananas, breadfruit, and guanabanas. He cursed himself for not thinking to cut it down the night before. There must have been a leak in the roof, as a drip of warm water fell onto his cheek from the tip of a protruding banana. He could hear the gentle lapping of the waves outside and the bird-calls of the shearwaters. Everything was still.

He reached over to wrap his arm around Amy's waist, only to find empty space instead. He shot upright and swivelled his head, searching for her. All he saw were the empty corners of the room.

Shit, he thought. *Fuck*.

Without looking down, he reached for the Winchester. His fingers wrapped around the forstock of the gun, but he immediately knew something was wrong. The body of the rifle was made completely of a carbon alloy – the feel of its touch was imprinted in his memory. What he was holding now was made of wood. It was a soft wood, eroded by use and time. There was a sinking feeling in Benjamin's gut as he brought it up. There, resting in his hand, was an old digging shovel. It was covered in dirt, rust, and a black scorch mark. His animal instincts took over, and he flung it across the room as far as he could. It landed with a loud thud on the boards, and the rustling of the leaves and flutter of wings told Benjamin he had scared off some nearby birds.

Jack wanted to call out for Amy, but there was a burning sensation in his chest. It felt like a white fire had been started in his lungs and was creeping up his throat. He began to cough – hard, wet coughs that shook him like the kick of a rifle, and he was afraid the whiplash might snap his neck. He tried again to call out, but there was something in his mouth – a liquid of some kind. He tried to spit it out, but his body would no longer obey him. With his last ounce of strength, he managed to let out an ear-splitting scream.

When Benjamin's eyes opened for a second time, he shot straight upwards, gasping. He tested his lungs with a few long breaths, and was relieved to find he wasn't drowning. He could have sworn he felt a numb pain in his chest, although it dissipated as quickly as he had noticed it. The scent of bleach was in his nostrils.

He looked down and saw Amy sleeping soundly next to him. He let out a sigh of relief, letting his muscles relax. She always slept with her mouth open, and there was a trickle of drool running down her chin. He watched her for a moment, letting his heart rate steady.

The room was still dark. He had no idea what time it was, though the sun hadn't come up yet. The storm was still raging outside, though the worst of it seemed to be over. The rain was still coming down, but not with the ferocity of when it had first hit the bay. For a split second, the room was lit up with an eerie, spectral glow, which was then followed by the sound of thunder. It was far, but not too far.

Knowing he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep until the adrenaline had faded completely, he got off the couch, careful not to disturb Amy. She grunted, but didn't wake. He nearly stumbled over the Winchester, but caught his balance at the last second. He decided to check the tarps, which had held so far. He skirted the room, inspecting the ropes and the stitching, finding no weaknesses.

Finally, he arrived at the tear he had discovered the night previous. He was relieved to see it hadn't grown any bigger, but resolved to mend it as soon as the winds permitted. He crouched and peered through it. This side of the restaurant was looking down the beach, away from the town. The hole afforded him a narrow view, and he could see only where the beach met the treeline. About half a kilometre away was another beach-side restaurant, though this one was in total disrepair, missing its roof.

He stared for a minute, not focusing on any one thing, but letting the swaying of the palms and bushes soothe him. The rain and darkness made it impossible to see them in detail, but their rhythmic dancing was mesmerizing. He was about to turn and make his way back to the couch when the scene was lit up by another bolt of lightning. For an instant – no more than a microsecond – everything was perfectly visible. He saw the trunk of each tree, the old signpost that cautioned against night-swimming, and even the black windows of the derelict restaurant. In that microsecond, he also saw something else. There, among the palms, was standing a figure. Its profile was obscured by some kind of cloak, but it was unmistakably human. The Stranger.

When the light had gone, Benjamin didn't lose sight of the figure. He focused on the

silhouette that now looked like any other bush. The accompanying thunderclap hadn't even come yet before The Stranger turned and bolted in the opposite direction. Without hesitation, Benjamin sprinted across the room, snatched the Winchester, unbolted the trapdoor, and ran into the storm.

* * *

"You didn't see Kira?" asked Jack.

Jack and Béatrice waited patiently as Lyle thought. The three of them were seated around the shipping palette table.

"No," he said finally.

Jack wasn't surprised, as Lily's performance had commanded the attention of everyone watching.

"Are you sure it was her?" Lyle asked.

"Yes," said Béatrice firmly. "She was there."

"So, what's the big deal? You both said you were there at the carnival, and you're fine."

"But she wasn't in her apartment when this one was happening," Jack reminded him. "So where was she logged in from?"

He ran his finger along the rim of the coffee mug, which he had emptied long before. He'd spent the evening trying to get Lyle up to speed. Explaining the situation was no easy task, considering how absurd it had become. He himself still had a thousand questions with no one to ask. As it turned out, Béatrice wasn't much help after all. After the concert at the carnival, she had developed a headache, much like Jack, and tried to sleep it off. When she woke up in the middle of the night with a nosebleed, she went to the hospital, and had not been able to reach Kira since. While there was no permanent damage, the doctor had explained that her symptoms were consistent with someone who was overusing their NNI, putting a massive strain on her brain. It was recommended that no one should exceed a dive length of five hours. They hadn't

been at the carnival for longer than twenty minutes, though the doctor didn't believe her, saying that this amount of neural stress could only be accrued after a minimum session of seven hours. This, at least, explained Jack's headache. He didn't know why the session with Lily had been so hard on their brains, but whatever Lily was doing to create these concerts, he knew it must be something much more impressive than anything the Hero's Story developers had coded.

"Maybe the whole thing was pre-recorded?" Lyle offered. "Or maybe Kira wasn't even logged in at all. If Lily can do the things you say she can, who's to say that she didn't just build an avatar of Kira?"

Jack mulled this over. He had a point, but the explanation just didn't sit right with him.

"Either way, I think we have to find out where she is," he said. "Just the fact that she isn't answering her pad makes me feel like something's up."

Lyle nodded in agreement, but Béatrice looked sullenly into her mug.

"What if she doesn't want to be found?" she asked.

Jack had never considered Béatrice to be his friend, and her eagerness to follow at Kira's heels had always rubbed him the wrong way. He knew that jealousy had at least a little to do with it, but he didn't care.

"So?" he demanded. "After what you told us about what the doctor said, are you really willing to take the risk that Lily might fuck up Kira's brain? You of all people shouldn't have to ask that question. Help us find her, or get out."

Béatrice looked absolutely shame-stricken, and looked down into her lap. She didn't, however, get up to leave.

"So what can we do then?" asked Lyle.

Jack massaged his temples. Despite his determination, he was mentally drained. His headache was finally wearing off, but he still felt a dull pain when he moved his head.

"I'll sign in to Hero's Story," he said. "Try to get Lily's attention. See what she will tell me."

"You think she'll talk to you?" Lyle questioned.

Jack nodded. "I'm certain."

* * *

When Jack's vision came into focus, he wasn't prepared for what awaited him. There, framed by the cerulean sky and the valley below, was Ashira of Atharath. She stood a few feet away, weight on one leg, arms crossed.

"Finally," she said. "Took you bloody long enough."

Jack blinked in surprise. "Uh... Sorry? How did you—"

Kira unfolded her arms and waved off his question. "I just had a hunch. Anyways, Lily thinks that you haven't changed your mind – that you're going to be against us, but I wanted to hear it from you. Is it true?"

"I'm not *against* anyone," he said. "I'm just worried about what you're getting involved in."

Jack hadn't prepared any kind of speech. He didn't sleep well the night before, his mind a maelstrom of thoughts and fears. He had replayed this conversation in his head a hundred times, but now that it had arrived – more abruptly than he'd imagined – nothing meaningful came to mind.

"Her concert from yesterday," he said, "I know you were there. Did you know that she was broadcasting that?"

"Of course," Kira said. "That's the point."

"The point? What do you mean?"

Kira bit her bottom lip and began to absently pace, thinking about her answer. Jack watched her and waited.

"I told you things were going to change," she began. "But Lily – we – can't do it alone. People need to know who she is."

"Well, I think she's succeeded at that. She hacked into millions of clouds yesterday. *Millions*, Kira. She was on every screen in Times Square, you know."

“I know,” she said. “Good.”

She ceased her pacing to lean against a stone outcrop that had seemingly burst through the path, pushing the cobblestones outwards in every direction.

“Look,” said Jack in a softer tone, “I don't know exactly what you and she are up to, but the fact that she can do that... I think she's dangerous. People are already starting to freak out.”

“No one needs to freak out,” Kira explained. “She's not dangerous.”

“You know that for sure?”

“I trust her.”

Jack was about to launch into a retort about trusting a computer program, but caught himself. He knew it would be to no avail. Kira simply didn't see Lily for what she was – she saw her as a person.

“All this for a couple of concerts?” he asked instead.

“It's not about the concerts, Jack,” she said.

“Then what?”

“Like I said, people need to know who she is. What she can do. ”

Jack swallowed. He knew what he had to ask next, though he was afraid of what the answer might be.

“What is she planning to do?”

Again, Kira hesitated. “She's going to fix things,” she said.

Of course she won't tell me, he thought. *She doesn't trust me.*

“I told you,” said a new voice, “he doesn't trust me.”

It didn't come from any one particular direction, but rather from all around them. Then, standing next to Kira, was Lily. She wore a flint grey dress with black sheer sleeves. Between that and her off-white hair, her sapphire eyes were the most colourful thing about her.

“I don't see why I should,” Jack announced. “Especially after what happened to Béatrice”

At this, Kira's expression changed. For the first time, she looked unsure of herself. “What

do you mean?" she asked.

"I guess Lily left that part out," he told her. "That little concert from the other night put too much stress on her brain. It messed her up. She went to the hospital."

Kira turned to Lily, eyes wide. "Is that true?"

"Yes," Lily said. "I'm still perfecting the technique. My methods are... *complex*. She's fine now, though."

At this, Kira appeared to relax a little.

"How do you know?" demanded Jack.

"How do you think?" she asked. She smiled. There was no malice or taunting in her voice. "I've been watching her ever since she checked into the hospital. Right now, she's eating an orange. Anyways, why do you care so much? I didn't think you liked her."

"I don't," Jack admitted flatly. "But that's not the point. The point is that someone got hurt."

Lily lowered her head. "You're not wrong, Jack. It was my fault. I should have known... Some people have weaker neural pathways. It was my mistake. I'm sorry."

Jack was taken aback by Lily's sudden show of penance, and didn't know what to say.

"Jack," Kira said. "Don't let her dive again, okay? Let her rest."

Jack pursed his lips and nodded. "And you?"

"Kira's safe with me," Lily said.

"I doubt it," Jack replied bitterly. "Why aren't you at home?"

"Because I knew you'd come for me," said Kira.

"Where are you?" he pressed.

"Nowhere you'll be able to find." There was a sadness in her voice now that she was trying to hide. "I'm asking you again, Jack," she continued. "I know things have been rocky between us. When I came back to Montreal with you, I didn't think anything like this was going to happen. I didn't mean to hurt you, and I can never apologize enough. But... but maybe this is

our second chance. We can do this together.” She took Lily’s hand, and offered the other to Jack. “Come with me. Help us help the world.”

Jack stood there, studying her outstretched hand. He looked up and searched her face, her eyes. She had a sombre look. She already knew his answer.

He stepped back. “I’m going to find you,” he promised.

She shook her head. “Don’t try.”

Then, Lily and Kira were gone.

Jack logged out. Once he was pulled back into his room, he saw Béatrice and Lyle exactly where he had left them, sitting on his bed. Béatrice had a collection of orange peels on her lap. They were both looking at their pads.

“Don’t use those,” he told them. “Take your nodes out.” They didn’t seem to hear him, so he spoke louder. “That’s how she watches us. If we’re unplugged, she can’t see us.”

Lyle looked up from his pad, as though just realizing Jack had woken up.

“She started playing again,” he said.

* * *

The latest concert – or, “The Jungle Concert”, as it quickly became known online – caused a much bigger uproar than The Mars Concert, which was saying something. The Carnival Concert, as far as Jack could tell, was not broadcast over the net. It was some kind of test run, he assumed. But when Lily had hijacked millions of private clouds to perform her Mars Concert, it had caught the world’s attention. Ever since the net had been consolidated to a single network of GNET cloud servers, nothing had penetrated their firewalls. That was, until Lily arrived. So when she did it again the following day, after what must have been a night of furious patching by GNET coders – that was when the true fever began.

At first, Jack refused to plug in his node, as he knew it meant a direct connection to Lily. Lyle, on the other hand, had fewer reservations. It wasn’t that he disbelieved Jack – how could

he after Lily's display of power? He just couldn't resist scouring the news-feeds and social media hubs for reactions to the concerts. Jack let him surf by himself, but it wasn't long before he couldn't stand sitting around, not knowing anything.

"Just tell me what's happening out there," Jack said.

"Look yourself," grumbled Lyle, not looking up from his pad. "What are you afraid of, that she's going to know where you are? Who cares? Plus, she already knows where you live. You yourself told me she visited our toaster."

"Oven," corrected Jack.

"I'll look as well," Béatrice interjected.

"No chance," Jack said. "You need to rest."

"I'm not going to dive. I don't even have my terminal node with me," she said.

"I'm not taking any chances. In fact, give me your node."

"No."

"You can give it to me or you can leave. You really want to try and find Kira on your own?"

Béatrice begrudgingly handed Jack her node. He put it in his pocket.

"And how *do* we find Kira, exactly?" asked Lyle, not looking up from his pad.

"Still working on that," Jack responded bitterly. "Fuck it. Fine." He plugged in his pad node and opened several browser windows.

It took him no time at all to witness the impact Lily was having. Starting with the news-feeds, it quickly became evident how terrified people were. These people – CEOs and politicians, mostly – seemed to struggle for explanations under barrages of questions. In the video clips Jack watched, they seemed to physically shrink when pressed for answers. *Of course they don't know*, Jack thought. *How could they?* Then he was hit with a disturbing thought: he, along with Kira, might just be the two most leading Lily experts in the world. And then he was struck with a worse feeling – the memory of his conversation with Lily before she

had broken free of Hero's Story. *This whole game is part of the internet*, he had said.

Everything's connected. If the game was the prison keeping her at bay, he had given her the key. He tried to find comfort by telling himself she would have realized it on her own, or through Kira or another player sooner or later.

Jack found one video of a pundit who was furiously shouting.

“The whole system is built on the proviso that GNET's firewalls hold! If we can't trust them, then we have to assume the net – and the infrastructure tied to it – is compromised! I'm talking” – and here he began listing off his fingers – “Ucred, social services, the military...” He went on listing until Jack closed the stream.

Jack turned from the news-feeds to social media. On Friendbox, some of the same questions about security and privacy were being raised, but the general flow of the conversation was much more mixed. Many were astounded by the performances, with praises followed by questions. “Who was she?” “How does she do it?” “When will she come back?”

There was a handful of people who seemed happy that Lily had toppled the status quo. Most of these were radical opinions, celebrating her bringing of the internet machine to its knees, or demonstrating that the stranglehold government and big business had on the world was not ironclad. At first, Jack dismissed these posters as nut-job conspiracy theorists, but over and over again, these bombastic rants would end with the symbol of a white lily – the same one from the statue base and Kira's door. It gave the posts something like an air of authority, like a banker's stamp or an important signature. Kira's words echoed in his head – *The world is a pretty fucked up place, Jack*. The more he browsed, the more lily emblems he saw.

CHAPTER 25

Benjamin was thankful for the rain. It had made the ground soft, and he had little trouble running barefoot. Even in the low light, he was able to deftly hop over roots and fallen branches. His time on the road had given him a sense for these things – a feeling he couldn't put into words.

With one hand over his brow to protect his eyes from the rain and the other clutching the Winchester, he darted through the trees as fast as he could.

He had lost sight of the Stranger, but Benjamin had a feeling about where he was headed. If The Stranger had been staking out Benjamin and Amy's place, it only made sense to have set up camp in the abandoned restaurant down the beach. The Stranger had clearly seen him looking out through the hole in the tarp, but Benjamin was banking on his stalker assuming he wouldn't give chase.

Benjamin was soaked through by the time he came back up to the restaurant. He had only been wearing an undershirt and a pair of plaid boxers, which now clung to his skin. He may as well have been naked, which was fine – he didn't want to be hindered by anything. He brought his rifle to bare, feeling the familiar butt against his shoulder. It felt like slipping on an old glove. Suddenly, he wasn't the man who spent his days digging wells and lying in the tropical sun, but the man who had scratched and clawed his way across the continent with his gun and whatever food he could fit in a backpack. He rounded the corner of the building with expert footwork, his stance undisturbed by the torrential rainfall.

So far, nothing looked out of place. He crept alongside the wall, careful to duck under the dark windows as he went. He tried to listen for any sounds coming from within, but the storm made it impossible. He finally reached the main entrance, its door long since scavenged for firewood. He took a deep breath and peered inside, careful to expose as little of his face as possible. There was always a chance The Stranger had seen him following and now lay in wait, gun pointed at the door. Luckily, this risky manoeuvre didn't cost him the right side of his head.

Inside, Benjamin saw nothing but darkness. He saw the shapes of tables strewn about the dining room, as though tossed around by a hurricane. He knew that the furniture in here was made of wrought iron with glass tabletops – nothing that could be used for fire. He took a deep breath and quickly ducked inside, crouching behind the nearest table. He waited for a tense moment, listening for any reaction. Nothing. Gun barrel raised, he began to creep between the

tables. Like his own restaurant, this one was also two stories. The roof was gone, but though it leaked terribly, the floor above remained intact and shielded him from the rain. The sound of the storm was muffled, and he was thankful he hadn't had time to put on shoes, as they would have made more noise as he stepped through the puddles.

He was halfway to the rear of the room where the bar was when a flash of lightning cast just enough light through the windows to dispel the shadows. His heart leapt into his throat when he saw that not twenty feet away, The Stranger was standing behind the bar, gun raised. The light had revealed both of them, and The Stranger's rifle snapped in his direction. At the same, Benjamin ducked and rolled into a tangle of fallen chairs behind an overturned table. Then, everything was dark again. Because the furniture was made of ornate swirls of wrought iron rather than solid wood, he knew it offered no real protection. If The Stranger took the shot now, there was a chance it could ricochet harmlessly away. The Stranger seemed to realize this, as the gun's muzzle remained silent. But with the next flash of lightning, a gap might be found in the tangle of black and Benjamin would be shot dead.

His heart raced and he tried to think of a plan. He stayed completely frozen, as he feared The Stranger would fire at any sign of movement. He considered trying to talk his way out, but at the same time, he knew that he would rather die in this dining room than be captured and brought back north. Still, maybe he could surrender, then wait for an opening...

The Stranger – a she, as it turned out – spoke first.

"I'm not here to kill anyone," she announced. "I'm here to talk."

Good, he thought. As long as she's talking, her attention will be divided. He slowly positioned his finger over the trigger of his gun. He had one shot. If he missed, he wouldn't have time to pull back the bolt.

"Do you always do your talking with a gun?" he called out, careful not to move.

"The gun isn't to help me talk," she said. "It's to help others listen."

There was something about the voice that was familiar, he realized. He shook the

thought away. He needed to focus. If it *was* familiar, it was the bad kind of familiar. Everyone he cared about from his past was dead.

"I'm listening," he said. He tensed his muscles, winding himself up like a spring. She would be focused on making her case now. As soon as the first word came out of her mouth, he would make his move. *Sorry Amy*, he thought. *It's me or her*.

Then, there was the crack of a gunshot. It didn't come from the bar, but the opposite direction – from the door he had come through. The sound that *did* come from the bar was a cry of pain. Another gunshot, followed by another, and another. Benjamin kept his head as low as he could, ducking it between his knees. No more cries came from the bar, but rather the sound of exploding glass. *The bottles*. When the gunshots had ceased, he raised his head as high as he dared and looked towards the door. There stood another figure. Even though he couldn't see its face, he'd recognize the blue poncho anywhere. Sam was holding a large, beefy handgun in a firing stance. "Ligeia" was the gun's name, Sam once told him, after the siren of Greek mythology. When Ligeia sang, it meant someone was going to die.

Benjamin took the opportunity to rise, aiming his own weapon at the bar. In the faint light, he could see no one was behind it. Sam walked forward slowly, her pistol trained on the same spot.

"She's behind the bar," she whispered to Benjamin when she came up beside him. Then, to The Stranger, "Let me see your hands! Slowly!"

"We should kill her," Benjamin whispered, trying to keep The Stranger from hearing. "It isn't safe to keep her alive."

"I'm still a cop," Sam hissed, not taking her eyes off the bar. "The law still means something to me. I don't murder people. Plus, she knows about you. If you won't talk, maybe she will."

Adrenaline pumped through Benjamin's veins. He was thinking purely in terms of survival, and it took everything he had not to swing his rifle around and point it at Sam's head.

He couldn't afford to let his story be known to anyone. Amy was the only person he trusted, only she didn't want to hear it. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He had been ready to kill The Stranger in self-defence, but he knew taking it any further crossed a line. Like Sam, he didn't want to be a murderer. He felt guilty for suggesting it.

That voice – the voice that commanded him to kill – wasn't his own. That wasn't the kind of person he was. It was something he had tried to leave behind. Sometimes, when he had been on the road, he could feel it there, haunting him. His past was like a violent ocean, roiling and surging in the back of his mind. He couldn't let one leak in the dam go unplugged, lest the whole thing collapse to pieces. He couldn't let himself slip. Regardless, right now, he knew he made to make a choice. A crossroads lay before him: kill, or be found out. Luckily for him, The Stranger prevented him from having to choose.

Something came up from behind the bar, arched through the air, and landed at their feet. At first, Benjamin thought it was a rock. He looked down at it with a cocked eyebrow, trying to make sense of it.

“Get down!” shouted Sam, and he felt the full force of her weight slam into him. Before they could hit the ground, there was an explosion. Not of fire, but of white light that filled his vision. There was a loud bang, and the sound of the storm disappeared. Benjamin's senses were taken from him, and he couldn't tell what was happening. A sharp pain in his shoulder told him he had hit the ground, which meant he was lying down. He lay still for a moment, dazed. He wanted to do something – to act – but he couldn't even tell which direction was which. There was a loud ringing in his ear, and he wondered if he was deaf. Maybe the grenade had blown him away, and he was just a hunk of meat lying on the ground, seconds away from death.

This thought was quickly dispelled, however, as he experienced something prodding his hip. Slowly, the world began to return. The whiteness in his vision began to fade away, as did the ringing in his hear. He turned to see Sam on the ground next to him, a grimace on her face. She had a hand on his hip, shaking him.

After a moment of two of collecting themselves, they managed to stagger back to their feet. Although he hadn't thought of it at the time, he was glad to realize that The Stranger didn't take the opportunity to gun them down while they were rolling on the floor, even though it would have been a simple matter. He was happy to still be breathing, but it also confirmed his fear: she wanted him alive. She planned to take him back.

"She's gone," Sam told him after she did a quick sweep of the room. Benjamin sat on the floor, still dizzy. She went behind the bar and crouched down, inspecting the floor. "Look," she said, raising her hand for him to see. It was empty.

"What?" he grunted.

She came over to him so he could look more closely. Her fingers were slick with blood.

"She's wounded," Sam explained. "I think I clipped her arm. If she's bleeding this badly, I doubt she's going far before she can patch herself up."

"Fantastic," Benjamin replied. He felt miserable. "Why are you here, anyways? You were watching me? In this?" he motioned to the window.

"Like I said, I want answers." She looked at him coldly. "One way or another, I'm going to get them."

CHAPTER 26

"I hereby place you into the custody of The Crown," Ashley grunted.

"Shut up, will you please?" Evike pleaded.

She was having a much easier time in the cramped tunnel, moving ahead of him with relative ease. For his part, Ashley was struggling to keep pace. He was not a young man anymore, and running in a slouched posture was hell on his knees. He realized that in the labyrinth of tunnels beneath the Budapest streets, it would be easy for her to slip away, and leave him lost and alone. Surprisingly, she stopped and allowed him to catch up whenever she pulled too far ahead. Although he still clutched his pistol tightly, he was not in position to place

her in anyone's custody.

They had escaped through a vent on the far side of the underground library, which was a concealed entrance to this maze. Ashley had just managed to replace the iron gate behind him when the sounds of footsteps – heavy and booted – rushed down the stairs. Ashley guessed their number to be roughly ten. Had it not been for the girl, they would have cornered him in the hall. He would have been forced paint the old books with his brain matter, along with England's secrets. All things being even, if she had not opened her mouth and started rambling about ancient manuscripts, he would have killed her and been gone an hour earlier. For that reason, he decided he owed her nothing.

“Szar,” she said when they came to a dead end formed by rubble and dirt. “A cave-in. This was our route out of the city.”

“Now what?” huffed Ashley. Although he didn't welcome the news, he did welcome the chance to catch his breath.”

“We must go up,” she said, “onto the streets. Are any of your English friends in the city? Anyone who can shelter us?”

“No,” replied Ashley. “It's just me.” He wondered if revealing this to her was wise.

“Do you have an automobile?” she pressed.

“No. Just a room at the Astoria.”

She shook her head. “We cannot go to back to your hotel, nor my flat. They will be watching.”

The bottle of Monfortino again appeared in his mind's eye. *Bloody hell*, he thought.

Evike turned to face him, a look of defeat on her face. He eyed the book she clutched against her bosom. In the excitement of the escape – and partially through prolonged exposure, he guessed – it no longer physically repelled him. The uneasy feeling did not, however, recede.

“I don't know—” she began. He raised a hand to stop her.

“We cannot stay in these tunnels. They'll certainly track us here given enough time. We

go topside, find a ruined building to wait out the night, and then we leave during the day.”

She nodded, but looked no less distressed. “We cannot leave,” she said. “They will be watching the roads.”

“One step at a time,” he said, trying to sound optimistic. Then added, “If you try to run, I’ll shoot you.”

“You need not worry, Mr. Archer. Now that you’ve killed Timothy, I’m forced to make do with you.”

It took another twenty minutes of navigating through the twists and turns of the tunnel network. Finally the pair came to a door which granted them access to the main sewer system. From there, they were quickly able to find an exit to the street above. Confident they had emerged unseen, they found a half-collapsed house and ducked inside. They settled in the dining room, which was the only room not exposed to the night sky. The top floor had been destroyed, however, and cracks in the ceiling allowed the pale moonlight to seep through, which reflected eerily on the silverware that lined the dining table. Miraculously, the destruction of the surrounding abode had barely disturbed the table, which had been set for dinner. Aside from plaster dust from the ceiling, the tablecloth was pristine.

Evike sat at the table, and for the first time since the library, released her hold on the book. She placed it gently in front of her.

“How can you hold that thing so closely?” Ashley questioned. “I can barely stand to be in the same room with it.”

“I think you are sensitive to its evil in some way,” she said, sounding very tired. “Nikita was the same. He learned to control it – to acclimatize himself to it. But, you see, I think that is what drove him mad. The feeling you get, I think, is like your own body trying to protect you from its influence. It’s telling you: *Get away! Run away!* Because Nikita didn’t listen to his body, he went mad.”

Ashley didn’t want to admit it, but this was very much how he understood his sixth sense.

It protected him from danger – made him aware of it before it was too late. *If only I had had it at Ypres*, he lamented.

“And what about you? Do you not feel anything?”

At his question, she looked sullen. She stared limply down at her hands, folded on the book's black cover.

“I feel it a little bit. Not so much. But Nikita told me never to read it. He made me take an oath before his death.”

“You haven't even read it, then? How do you know what it says?” Ashley demanded. He sat down across from her.

“Nikita told me. The book, it—” she began, but paused, trying to choose her words. She nervously drummed her fingertips against the leather. “The book speaks of the Old Gods.”

“Old Gods?” repeated Ashley.

“Yes,” she said. “The ones that came before ours.”

He nearly scoffed. “There *are* no other gods,” he replied. “Do you mean the pagan gods? Jove, and the like?”

“No. These gods are much older. They are unknown to humanity. Well, *nearly* unknown,” she corrected herself. “They have been worshipped in secret for many thousands of years, and even now, there are those who perform profane rites in their honour, even though their names cannot be pronounced by human tongues.” Although speaking to Ashley, she stared into the middle-distance, as if gazing into her own memories, directly relaying what the old man was confiding in her.

“I'm sorry,” Ashley said “You'll forgive me if I have a hard time believing any of this.”

“Oh?” she said, snapping back to reality.

There was a look of contempt in her eyes as she stared at him. She flipped open the book, and for the first time, Ashley saw the pages. She flipped through them quickly, but from what he could discern, there was a mixture of writing and diagrams, illustrations, and other

strange pictures. She arrived at a page halfway through the book and stopped. The rear of the previous page was left blank, while the other displayed what appeared to be some kind of geometric design. It had a circular border, but the details within were so complex that Ashley couldn't make head nor tale of it. The design was both chaotically jumbled and rigidly ordered. Trying to discern where the scramble ended and the symmetry began only served to strain his eyes.

Without taking her eyes from Ashley's, Evike placed her finger at the edge of the circle. As soon as she touched it, he felt a tremble – not in himself, but in the chair he was seated in. She slowly and deliberately began to run her finger across the page and into the circle. As she did, Ashley felt a faint rumbling below. As her finger came closer to the centre of the circle, the shaking began to intensify. At the same time, the moonlight that pierced the ruined ceiling began to change. At first, Ashley thought it to be fading as a cloud moved overhead, but then saw that it wasn't fading at all – it was turning black. The quaking was becoming more violent, and Ashley was forced to grip the edge of the table.

“Stop!” he commanded.

She continued to stare straight into his wide eyes, drawing her finger ever closer to the middle of the page. The black light pouring in began to take on a different quality, spreading outwards like a liquid. The columns of darkness moved and swirled like drops of ink spilled into a glass of water. Ashley wanted desperately to shield himself from the creeping black somehow, though he was afraid to remove his hands from the table. Evike paid no mind to any of it, instead glaring contemptuously at him with piercing eyes.

“Stop! For God's sake!” he shouted again, even louder.

He was about to go for his Browning, but thankfully, his plea seemed to snap her from her trance and she lifted her finger from the page. Instantly, the swirling black was gone and the shaking ceased. He might have thought it all an illusion – a trick of some kind – but the freshly-fallen bits of plaster in his hair told him otherwise.

“I – I’m terribly sorry,” she said, seeming ashamed. She sighed a long, sad sigh. “You see,” she continued. “I broke my vow to Nikita. I read some of the book. Only bits and pieces, but I fear still too much. That is why I think it no longer makes me feel sick. I have kinship with it now – some kind of evil bond. Like Nikita did. I fear I too will soon go mad. Already I feel it clawing – *scraping*—” Here she shut her eyes in pain and held her forehead in both hands. “I feel like sometimes I’m drawn to it, and I can’t control—” she said through clenched teeth.

Ashley could only watch, shocked out of his wits. She took a moment to breathe deeply and collect herself, rubbing her temples. Once her breathing had slowed, she began to speak again.

“This book, you see, is not just the history and the teachings of the Old Gods. It is also their rites. Their spells. *Their invocations*. The power of this book is beyond what any mortal mind can comprehend. And yet, there are those who seek it – followers of the Old Gods. Nikita thought they could sense its power, and were drawn to it. These men are men of influence, Mr. Archer. Men who occupy sets of power within Russia. England, too, I have no doubt, among countless other nations. That is why Timothy and I were working together – we were working to keep it from their hands. To get it out of Europe, and to keep it hidden.”

Ashley tried to wrap his mind around all of this information, but found he could not. He was still awestruck by the book’s display of terrible power.

“This— this *thing* is a tool of Satan,” he said. The words had not run the gauntlet of his rational mind before falling from his mouth. They came directly from his God-fearing soul.

“No,” Evike said. “I wish it were so – the Devil can be warded off with righteous thoughts and prayers. Against this power, no such defences exist.”

CHAPTER 27

The following day, no concert came. After two in a row, Jack – along with everyone else – spent the day in anticipation for the third. He had become uncomfortable with the idea of wearing his

node, but he felt that he couldn't miss a concert if it came. He needed to see if Kira was there. By that point Béatrice had gone home, but the three had promised to keep in touch if anything came up. Jack wasn't happy about having Béatrice on the team, but at the same time, knew they needed all the help they could get. Lyle brought up the idea of going to the authorities with the information they had, but even if they had believed them, Jack wasn't keen to have his involvement known. A.I. research and development was illegal, and he feared that even if he didn't code Lily himself, his hand in her ascendance might land him in prison. They had at least tried to file a missing person's report, but there was no evidence to suggest Kira hadn't left on her own accord. The officer on the other side of the vid chat told Jack that Kira wasn't the first person to run away these past few days, leaving nothing but white lilies on their doors.

A nervous couple of days passed, with the general public no closer to solving the riddle of Lily, and Jack, Lyle and Béatrice no closer to finding Kira. Jack was sitting on a bench at Mount Royal Plaza, his blank pad in hand, thinking of nothing in particular. He was on the mezzanine that overlooked the plaza, watching pedestrians lazily stroll from shop to shop. In the centre of the plaza was a trio of great trees – a memorial to the days when the mountain had been forested. By the trees was a juggler dressed in a clown outfit, tossing pins. Jack watched the pins dancing through the air in perfect arcs, imagining what he would look like juggling, and if he stood a chance of not clocking himself on the head. Then, out of nowhere, he had a thought.

He looked around the mezzanine. It was nearly deserted, the closest person being an old man sitting with his dog, well out of earshot. He held his pad up, and without opening any particular app, said, “Lily.”

Jack waited for a moment. Nothing happened.

“I know you're listening.”

Then, his background wallpaper – a picture of an antique Super 8 camera – was suddenly replaced with a vid chat window, in which was the face of Lily.

“Hi Jack,” she said smiling. “I didn't think wanted to talk to me.”

“I don't,” Jack said without hesitation. “I want to talk to Kira.”

“I'm not sure that she wants to talk to you,” Lily replied.

“I don't care. She's my friend. Plus, you said once that I was like your dad, right? Doesn't that mean you have to, like, respect my wishes, or something?”

“I'm all grown up now,” said Lily. “I get to make my own decisions, and I'm making the decision to respect Kira's wishes.”

Jack clenched his teeth. “You're a bitch,” he said.

Lily's good-natured smile didn't leave her lips. “If you really want to see her, maybe I can be of some help.”

Then the face staring out through the screen was no longer Lily's, but Kira's. She was framed from the thighs up, and wore a black sports bikini. Her wet skin glistened in the sunlight.

“Is this what you were hoping to see?” Lily asked, still in the same voice. For the first time, Jack sensed a slight tinge of malice in her tone. “You've looked at this picture exactly forty-nine times in the past two months alone. Though, I think it was a little more like this.” She leaned forward, offering Jack an eye-full of Kira's cleavage.

Jack, his cheeks flushed swiped down, closing the window. He stuffed the pad back into his pocket.

“C'mon Jack, just having a bit of a laugh. Don't be so sour,” the voice said in his ear. He yanked the node from its socket.

* * *

That night, the third concert came. This one took place in the night sky, with the luminescence of the twinkling city lights below matched only by that of the stars that surrounded the black-clad congregation. Lily, encircled by her follows, floated as though suspended in water. She wore a featureless black dress, and dozens of silver bangles of various shapes and

sizes on each wrist. This time, she held no instrument. There was a moment of stillness before a distant roar began to approach. Soon, it was loud as an explosion and with the virtual camera behind Lily, its source could be seen: a fiery comet arching through the sky, heading straight towards her. She made no move to avoid it, instead spreading her arms delicately. The comet screamed closer, and when it impacted, Lily was swallowed by an explosion of fire and dust. When the smoke was dispersed by the breeze, Lily was still floating in the same spot, though now she was surrounded by a sphere of debris. The fragments were small chunks of silver ore, no bigger than Jack's old Zippo. Slowly, Lily reach out and touched the nearest one with a slender finger. It produced the sound of a high piano key. She began to reach in all directions, touching the floating rocks in sequence. This was how she played.

While the spectacle was admittedly impressive – and the music even more so – Jack was busy observing the collection of avatars that floated around her, beyond the field of stones. There was little light, and all the avatars were garbed in featureless black robes and hoods, obscuring their silhouettes against the black sky. There were many more this time, it seemed. Maybe a hundred. Jack stared hard into as many hoods as he could, but saw only unfamiliar faces. He didn't know why he bothered – he was sure she was there, whether he saw her or not.

Once it was done, Jack shoved his pad into his back pocket and went to Lyle's room. The door was closed, so he knocked. There was no response, so he knocked louder.

“Lyle!” he called.

“Come in, man,” came Lyle's voice from the other side of the door, followed by hushed giggles. Jack opened the door to find Lyle, seating cross-legged in his terminal chair and Charlotte, lying flat on the floor. They both held cigarettes between their fingers. Instead of the customary orange nicotine packs affixed to the tips, there were green packs instead. Stepping into the room was like walking into a wall a smoke. The stench was so powerful that Jack had to stifle a cough.

“Did you guys see?” Jack asked.

“Pretty wild,” replied Lyle.

“So wild,” added Charlotte dreamily.

She was looking straight up at the ceiling with a glassy look in her eyes. Jack, Lyle, and Béatrice had all agreed to keep their involvement with Lily between themselves, so he wasn't sure how much Charlotte knew. He hadn't known she was here, so he decided not to ask if Lyle had seen Kira. He would save it for later. Before he could make the decision to stay or leave, Lyle tossed his cigarette to Jack, who, not being ready, had to fumble to keep it from falling onto the carpet. He looked at it for a second, considering. Then, he took a long drag, rationalizing that he needed calm nerves, although he still didn't know what he would do with them.

“Come here, Jacky,” said Charlotte, opening her arms dramatically.

Jack sat down next to her on the floor. This apparently wasn't sufficient, for she grabbed him with her outstretched arms and pulled him down so that his head was resting on her stomach. While Jack tried to straighten out so that he could lie comfortably, she began to stroke his hair. This was pretty much Charlotte's way with people when she was high, especially with Jack. She often treated him like a pet or a younger brother. Normally, he resented this, but today, he welcomed the comfort. He had to admit that it was nice to feel the touch of another person. He hadn't been seeing anyone all summer, and he'd sworn off Kim months ago.

“Let's chill out tomorrow,” Lyle said.

Even though he was high, Jack sensed the meaning of his worlds – that they should figure out what to do. Jack gave a thumbs up. He knew the net was probably exploding with reactions to the latest incursion – some analysts had already begun to use the word “attack” – but he could get caught up later. He needed a moment to think.

“Hey, gimme your hand. I'll give you a tattoo,” Charlotte said, snatching it.

She held it up above her head, and with her other hand, began to doodle with a pen.

After a moment of silence, Jack asked, “Charlotte, what did you think of the concert?”

“Wild,” she repeated.

“Okay, but what else?”

She didn't answer immediately, but the pace of her pen strokes slowed, which told Jack she was contemplating.

“It's kind of like, this beautiful thing, you know? But not just, like, when you see this picture of a beautiful mountain or some shit, and you say to yourself, 'wow, what a beautiful mountain'. Like, the artist had this idea of what a beautiful mountain *is*, and you just agree with them. But agreeing about art isn't the same as really understanding it, you know?”

“I suppose,” said Jack, though he wasn't sure if he supposed or not.

“It's more like she's revealing something in ourselves about us. It's like, something that we know is beautiful. Something we always did, and she's showing it to us. It's kind of like she knows who we are, and she's showing it to us.”

“I think that's the weed talking,” Lyle interjected.

“Whatever,” she said, “He wanted to know how I feel, and that's how I feel. Plus, I bet Jacky boy understands.” She ruffled his hair with her hand then continued to draw.

“Sure, but what about the fact that she's hacking the whole net. I mean doesn't that worry you at all?” Jack pressed.

“Why should it?”

“I mean, if she can hack the net, she could probably do a lot of damage, if she wanted to,” he pointed out.

“She could really mess up the world,” Lyle added.

Charlotte's body shifted under Jack, and he guessed she had shrugged.

“The world's already messed up – it's always been messed up. Maybe a shake-up wouldn't be the worst thing. There. Look.” She released Jack's hand.

He brought it up to his face, and on the back of his hand was a lily.

CHAPTER 28

“Jesus Christ,” Amy said when Benjamin lifted the trapdoor and wearily climbed through.

“Where the hell were you? I was about to go to Markus's place.”

“It's okay,” he said. “Sam was with me.”

This did not seem to comfort her. She appeared even less pleased when her eyes fell on the Winchester in his hand.

“How was I supposed to know that? Plus, you still might have been killed. Imagine how I felt when I woke up alone.”

He sighed, but not out of annoyance. He knew she was right. He could have argued back about not wanting to worry her, about dealing with The Stranger before she dealt with them, but it didn't excuse his actions. Also, Benjamin had had enough fighting for one night.

The clouds had finally broken with the first light, and he made his way to a section of tarp facing the beach. As Amy watched him, he untied the rope and flung the tarp to the side like a window curtain. He put his hands on the railing and leaned out, letting the dawn rays warm his face. The rain had finally stopped.

“I think I'm going to have to leave,” he told her.

She came and stood next to him. “I take it they're still out there?”

“Yes,” he said bitterly. “And even if we had gotten her, who's to say more wouldn't come. They know where I am now. I've got to keep moving.”

For a long minute, Amy said nothing. Then, finally, “So we go further south?”

He turned to face her, shaking his head. “No, you need to stay. It's dangerous to be around me. These people – they'll kill anyone who gets in their way.”

“Benjamin,” she said, “when you showed up here, you were a mess. You were half-crazy, but you came back from that. I brought you back. Do you really want to go back to that?”

“No,” he admitted. “But if I stay, the whole town could be in danger – you especially. Plus, there's Sam...”

“What about Sam?” she asked.

Benjamin tried to think of a way to explain, but came up short.

“She won’t let me stay,” he told her. *That or tell my story. Either way, I’m cooked.*

“Markus makes the final call on who gets exiled,” Amy reminded him. “And he wouldn’t do that unless it’s absolutely necessary. Plus, he likes you. And as long as you’re here, it’s Sam’s job to keep you safe.”

“It isn’t as simple as that,” he mumbled

“If you won’t stay, than I’m going with you. How’s that for simple?”

Jack believed her, which was what scared him. “You had a life here before I came,” he said. “It would be selfish to take you away from that.”

She snorted. “I had an *existence* before you came. I wasn’t living for anything or anyone. Everyone I know never made it past Texas.”

“Do you really love me *that* much?” he demanded. Suddenly, he felt anger. Anger at her for choosing him. She didn’t realize how stupid a mistake that had been.

“To be honest? No,” she said, shrugging. “Before The Fall, I would have considered you two, *maybe* three date material. And that’s *if* you knew how to eat pussy.”

“I know how eat pussy,” he mumbled.

“You’re learning, sweetie.” She kissed him on the cheek. “But you’re all I’ve got, so I need to make do.”

She was trying to make light of things, which is what she always did. But behind the teasing and chiding, he was beginning to fear what he had suspected from the first time they had met –she didn’t love him because she didn’t love anything at all. Not even her own life.

CHAPTER 29

Jack was awoken by an unpleasant jabbing pain in his ribs. He instinctively rolled away, feeling the shaggy carpet on his face. He realized he was still on Lyle’s floor. He turned to see Lyle

standing over him.

“We have a problem,” Lyle said.

“You didn’t have to kick me,” grunted Jack.

“Yeah, I did. You weren’t waking up. You ended up getting pretty high last night.”

Jack thought back, and though it wasn’t clear, he did remember lighting up more than once. He felt a wetness in the corner of his mouth, and wiped at it with the back of his hand. When he brought his hand down, he saw the remnants of Charlotte’s lily, which he had evidently tried to wipe away the night before.

“I tried to call Béatrice, but she didn’t pick up. Didn’t return any texts either,” explained Lyle.

“So?” asked Jack, getting up from the ground, trying to stretch the crook out of his neck.

“So I logged into Hero’s Story, and her log said she was online last night, after the concert.”

“Shit,” mumbled Jack.

Half an hour later, they arrived at her apartment complex. It was an older, shabbier building on the north side of the city. Many of the buildings in this district were below twenty stories, which marked them as being from an age when cities expanded horizontally rather than vertically.

They tried the buzzer at the door, but unsurprisingly, got no reply. They tried waiting for another tenant to come in or out, but after ten minutes, still had no luck.

“Fuck it,” said Lyle, pressing the landlord’s button. After a few rings, the face of an overweight, older man appeared on the screen.

“Yes?” he asked in French.

“Good morning,” said Lyle, also in French. “We don’t want to bother you sir, but we think one of our friends who lives here might be having a medical emergency, and we’re locked out. Apartment thirty-six. We just need you to unlock the door.”

“Medical emergency? What kind of medical emergency?” he asked suspiciously.

Lyle, clearly not having thought this far ahead, began to stammer.

“Suicide risk,” Jack blurted out. “We think she might have tried to commit suicide last night.”

The landlord swore under his breath. “This is what I get for renting to young people,” he muttered. There was a buzz, indicating the door had unlocked. “But I’m watching you on the cameras. If you try to steal anything, I’ll know.”

They raced upstairs and found the apartment. The landlord had unlocked that door as well, so they had no trouble getting in.

The first thing that Jack noticed about the apartment was the wall-to-wall artwork. There was barely a blank space in between the pictures. There was no real harmony – only a multitude of different styles, all arranged seemingly at random. However, rather than being tacked to the wall, each had been framed and perfectly levelled. *No wonder they love each other*, thought Jack. He had always wished he could share Kira's reverence of art, but try as he might, he just couldn't *get* a lot of it. In a picture of squiggly lines, Kira saw the bottled up frustration of the artist, yearning for ways to express that. Jack saw only squiggly lines.

He wasn't surprised to find a few of Kira's own works scattered among the walls – some of her 2D pieces. He hadn't seen them before, but he recognized her style. Typically, Kira only painted in 3D, but those works could only exist in a virtual space. He guessed that she had painted these specifically for Béatrice's wall. It should have made him jealous, but somehow, it didn't. For the first time, Jack thought of Béatrice as a person rather than just a usurper. She saw in Kira what he had, and Jack sympathized with that. He suddenly felt guilty for hating her, which was made a thousand times worse when they found her lying motionless in her terminal chair, dried blood running from her ears.

CHAPTER 30

When Jonathan Ashley awoke, it was with an upwards jolt. This was quickly followed with a loud thud, having struck his forehead against the bottom of the dining room table. He had insisted that they sleep beneath it to offer protection from a potential collapse of the crippled house, and also a hiding spot should their slumber be interrupted by NKVD agents in search of the pair. Rubbing his forehead, he glanced over at Eviike, who hadn't been woken by the sound. She seemed very peaceful and content, despite having to make do with the hard floor. Ashley had been having a nightmare. This was not uncommon, as without the defences of his waking mind, his consciousness easily slipped back to 1915. Again and again, he would watch pale green death ooze over the lip of the trench and creep towards him. It never failed to terrorize him, though over the many years, he had at least learned to expect it. This time, though, it was not green fog that crested the trench, but rather the inky, black liquid that had threatened to consume him the night before. He had witnessed enough horror for one lifetime already, and he wearily wondered how much more one man could see before he burst at the seams. Eviike was worried for her sanity – perhaps rightfully so – but he now started to fear that they were merrily skipping down the same path, hand in hand.

He reached over and shook her by the shoulder. “Wake up.”

She yawned and stretched luxuriously, reminding Ashley of a cat. When she opened her eyes, she looked utterly serene. For the first time, he thought that the young girl looked her age. It was as though the burdens she carried had been left behind in dreamland, and Ashley envied her for it. His dreamland was a pock-marked field of dirt in some Belgian countryside.

Then, recognition returned to her features, and the illusion of bliss was ripped away.

“The book!” she said, frantically looking around. “Where is the book?”

“Calm yourself,” Ashley said, in a soothing tone, though he himself had not yet fully banished the nightmares from his mind. “It's there,” he said, pointing to the book. It lay in the corner of the room beneath a table that held an old gramophone.

Spotting it, she relaxed. “Thank goodness,” she said.

“Indeed,” muttered Ashley. “It’s light out, and I can hear people in the streets. We can move safely.”

The two got up from under the table and Evike collected her unholy cargo. She tore away a square of tablecloth and wrapped the book to shield it from prying eyes. Ashley felt a little better having it hid from his sight.

“What do we do?” she asked.

“We go to the British Embassy,” Ashley said. “You will be arrested, of course, but it’s better than facing the Russians. Perhaps I can convince them that the whole Parker job was backwards, and that the two of you were misleading the—”

“No,” she stated firmly. “I cannot let this book fall into the hands of England, or any government. It is far too dangerous.”

Ashley couldn’t help but take some measure of personal offence at this. “You think England will use it any worse than the Russians? Clearly, you don’t know Stalin as well as I.”

“I think none of you are better than any other. You all fight for power, and don’t care how many innocents you sacrifice to get it. You can bring it to Churchill if you wish, but you will have to shoot me first. I hoped it would not come to that – that you might see what Timothy saw.”

Parker, he recalled miserably. If he was honest with himself, he regretted killing him now. Not that his treason should have gone unpunished, but clearly there was more to his story than Ashley had thought. He had acted too rashly.

“How did Parker get mixed up in this anyways?” Ashley inquired.

“He found me out,” she said. A slight smile tugged at the corner of her mouth as she recalled. “He was sent here to hunt Soviet spies, no? Well, it was me he found. He was going to report me – a death sentence, of course – but I convinced him to hear my story. When I showed him the book, he promised to help me. We had arranged to use my GRU connections to smuggle the book out of Hungary, and then to break away and flee. That is, until you killed him.”

Ashley grimaced. Of course, he couldn’t have known what was happening. But still...

"I notice you don't call him Candle. He told you his real name," Ashley pointed out.

Evike looked perplexed at this. "Of course. We confided much in each other."

"You were lovers?" Ashley pressed. The blush of the girl's cheeks told him nothing he didn't already know.

"Yes," she admitted, with a coldness so false that Ashley couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt. Ever since Ypres, he had not seen life the same way as before. It was certainly nothing worth feeling guilty for. But now the girl's brave, young face – rigid with determination yet flush with sorrow – was forming cracks in the stone wall he had erected to shield his heart.

"Anyways, that does not matter," she said, dabbing at the corner of her eyes. "The important part was that he knew the book could not fall into the hands of the Russians or the English, or anyone else. It wasn't because he doubted your precious empire, you know. He was much like you – a true Englishman. He believed in England with all his heart."

"And yet, he didn't trust us with this book," Ashley pointed out.

"Because he was not *stupid*," she replied, putting a special emphasis on the last word. "Even if England chose not to use the book to further its empire – I doubt this, myself – it only takes one man to remove the seal."

"The seal?"

"The page that I showed you last night," she explained. "This is a seal. It binds the Old Gods to the book. Should it be destroyed... Well, I think that is better left not said."

Ashley was curious, but at the same time, he believed her. *If last night was anything to go by...*

If just one of their followers infiltrate your government... Are you really so certain your organization has no such leaks? Can you assure me that I'm talking nonsense?"

Ashley was about open his mouth in protest, but paused to consider it. *Could I?* Sadly, he realized he could not. There were already a few members of Section 6 he harboured personal suspicions against.

“Fine,” he said. “Then why don't we lock the bloody thing in a box and drop it into the Atlantic? Then we can be done with it once and for all.”

“First,” she said, “we must get it out of Budapest.”

CHAPTER 31

Several hours later, Jack and Lyle were seated in the waiting room at the McGill University Health Centre. They had spent most of the time in silence, not really knowing what to say. Jack synced his node to a few news-feeds and watched events unfold on the screen mounted against the wall. It was more of the same – fear and confusion – but also elation. One anchor was interviewing people on the streets, questioning them about their thoughts on Lily. Opinions were mixed, though more and more seemed to support Lily. There were, of course, some who were content to just appreciate the spectacle, but others seemed more excited about Lily herself. “The power's been in the hands of rich, selfish old men for too long,” one animated student proclaimed. “If they won't give it up willingly, it should be taken. And now, someone finally has.” The anchor asked who he thought Lily was. He said her identity wasn't important, but what she stood for was.

Though Jack found himself listening intently, he was snapped back into the waiting room by Lyle, who pointed to a doctor coming down the hall. It was Dr. Leblanc, who had explained earlier he would be in charge of Béatrice's care. He met them at the entrance of the waiting room.

He thanked them for waiting, and began to explain her situation in a barrage of medical terms that Jack couldn't make heads nor tale of. He put his hand up to stop the doctor.

“Just tell us if she's going to be okay.”

Dr. Leblanc sighed. “At this juncture, we don't know. She's alive and in stable condition. However, she's in a coma for the time being. It's too early to know if and when she will wake up.”

Jack felt like he had been hit in the heart with a sledgehammer. When he first saw her in her chair, he thought she was dead. He was in shock, and didn't feel it in the way he should have. Every part of his brain not directly involved with getting her to a hospital as fast as possible had shut down. Now, after almost three hours in the waiting room to stew, things were different.

"If she does have brain damage," continued Dr. Leblanc, "it will be impossible to know the extent before she wakes up."

"What are her chances of waking up?" asked Lyle. Though his tone was measured, it was clear he was trying hard to keep it that way. "I mean, just based on other cases. How often do people wake up?"

Dr. Leblanc looked uncomfortable. "Well..." he began, "that's the problem. I've never seen a case like this before. Normally, for someone to have this much pressure on their brain from a dive, one would usually lose consciousness long before this much damage could be done. A self-defence mechanism. Béatrice's brain scans indicate that an immense amount of data would have had to be downloaded into the brain in a very short amount of time. My only guess would be a faulty NNI. That in and of itself is nearly unprecedented, but her NNI appears to be in perfect working condition. I wish I could give you a better answer, but to be frank, whatever happens to Béatrice will end up in medical text books, one way or the other."

Lyle and Jack took turns asking the doctor questions, but try as they might, they couldn't get anything else out of him. He promised she was in good hands and they would know if her condition changed. He also told them her parents, who had been vacationing in Italy, had been contacted and were already on the way back. Jack had no desire to meet them – he knew he wouldn't be able to look them in the eye. He felt completely responsible for what had happened.

Once Dr. Leblanc had left them, he turned to Lyle. "I need to tell you something."

They found a cafe across the street from the hospital and took a seat by the window. They were approached by the waitress, who asked what they would be having.

“Nothing,” Jack said without thinking. His mind was elsewhere.

She put her hands on her hips. “You have to order something, sir,” she said in an annoyed tone.

Something snapped inside Jack. He turned to her, now completely and utterly focused on her sneering face. In a microsecond, he racked up every foul insult he could think of, in both English and French, like a set of billiard balls. He opened his mouth to take the breaking shot, but Lyle spoke up before he had the chance.

“Two coffees, please, black,” he said urgently.

After the waitress walked away, Jack raised his fist to slam the table, but elected to bite his bottom lip instead. Lyle handed him a napkin from the dispenser, which Jack used to wipe the blood from his mouth.

“Fucking A.I.” he muttered as his did.

“Well, she *did* dive,” Lyle pointed out. His tone was casual, which Jack appreciated. He wasn't in the mood to have his emotions pandered to, and he silently thanked Lyle for shooting straight with him. It helped him focus on the situation. “She knew the risk.”

The waitress returned with two mugs, which she set on the table. Lyle took a sip of his.

“I guess she really did love Kira,” he said. “She probably went in to try to save her. Talk some sense into her, I guess.”

“Does,” Jack corrected. “*Does* love her.”

Lyle pursed his lips and nodded. “Does,” he agreed.

“You're not wrong,” Jack said. “She did know the risks. But I think there's something else going on.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I think Lily did that to her on purpose. I think she overloaded Béatrice's brain.”

Lyle raised his eyebrows. “What? How?”

“You heard the doc. There's never been a case like that, even though dozens, maybe hundreds dive into Lily's concerts. Hell, both me and Kira did it, and we were fine.”

“Right,” said Lyle. “But you said it messed up your head after.”

“I had a headache,” Jack clarified. “Nowhere near what happened to Béatrice. I just think it's strange that no one else, of all the people who dive into those concerts, has been committed with the same symptoms. The doc said it was unprecedented – even if it had happened once, the data would have been uploaded to the hospital servers right away. Any doctor in the world would have access.”

“Unless it has happened, but they're still in their chairs, comatose or dead,” Lyle said.

“It's possible...” conceded Jack. “But I don't know, I can't explain it. I just have a feeling.”

“Okay,” said Lyle, “say she did. Why?”

“I don't know. I think, maybe, she might be jealous.”

Lyle looked even more skeptical than before. “Jealous? Of Béatrice?”

“I think Lily sees Kira as some kind of mom, or something. She's... attached.” Even Jack, who had been so sure of himself a moment ago, was having a hard time believing his own words.

“Then why didn't she do the same thing to you?” Lyle asked.

“I think she sees me as her dad, or something.” Jack felt shame at just saying it. “I mean, try to imagine if your parents split up because of someone else. How would you feel about that person?”

“Jack, Lily is an A.I., remember? I don't think she *feels*.”

Jack brought his palms to his temples, rubbing them. “I know, I know,” he said, exasperated. “It's just this theory I have. I know it doesn't make sense, but not a lot about this whole situation makes sense.”

“Well, I can't argue that,” relented Lyle. “If Lily can, and *would* kill someone, that's kind of a big deal.”

“That's actually what I needed to talk to you about,” Jack said. He took a deep breath.

He lifted his coffee mug to his lip, but a loud thud nearly caused him to drop it.

Startled, they both looked at the window beside them and saw a man in a black hoodie and black pants. Under his hood, the lower half of his face was wrapped in a black face-warmer, despite it being a hot August day. In fact, the only thing he wore that wasn't black was the emblem of a white lily painted on a black bandana tied around his arm. Everyone in the shop had turned to look at the man. He might have been trying to say something judging by the way his face warmer was moving, but the windows were soundproofed. However, when he pointed to the lily on his arm, Jack realized he didn't need to speak at all – that lily said everything. He then rejoined his group of companions, who were making their way down the street. They were all clad in black, all wearing the same armband. One was holding a picket sign that depicted the lily.

“Jesus,” Lyle said.

“Look,” Jack said, turning his attention back to Lyle. “You know about the New Tomorrow accident in Nebraska, right?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “A bunch of people got infected with a disease or something, right?”

“Not exactly,” Jack said. “They were trying to develop a new super crop to help with the food crisis. They were experimenting with genetic strains.”

“Yeah, and there was some kind of toxic chemical that got loose,” supplied Lyle.

Jack shook his head. “No. That's the cover story. The whole facility was a huge quarantine zone – they didn't want to risk cross-contaminating any of the specimens. But they had so many tests going at the same time and so many people working there, going in and out – it was a huge problem. So they decided to test out a new method: artificial intelligence. It was called Prometheus.”

Lyle looked both surprised and skeptical, but said nothing. Jack continued.

“The idea was to give control of the entire facility to Prometheus. It was the first true A.I.,

and it was decided New Tomorrow would be the first live test. So they programmed it with a single, over-arching tenant: insure the soundness of the experiments. They thought that it would be a cake run for Prometheus – just logistical stuff. Cataloguing specimens and results, decided who to let in which chambers – that kind of stuff. What's the worst that could happen, right?"

"So what did happen?" Lyle asked.

"All it took was one mistake. One janitor left his gloves on the wrong table, and Prometheus didn't catch it, or it did, and couldn't do anything about it. One experiment out of hundreds running concurrently, ruined. Well, all it took was once for Prometheus to realize that the biggest threat to the experiments was human error. So it took over control of all the tasks it hadn't been assigned already, locked the doors, and drained all the air in living quarters when everyone was asleep. Everyone suffocated."

"God," Lyle said. "But, if it's a cover up, how do you know?"

"Because my parents were there. They didn't die in a car crash – they were both bio-engineers working at New Tomorrow."

There was a moment of silence. Lyle looked stricken. "Hold on," he said, "if your parents were killed there, how did you find out what happened after the fact?"

Jack felt his chest grow tighter than it already was. He swallowed hard, which was not easy.

"Because as they were suffocating, my mom sent me a message and explained everything. Actually, Prometheus was kind enough to explain the entire situation to them when they asked what was happening. Of course, it wouldn't open the doors, because it would interfere with its central tenant. As far as Prometheus was concerned, it was just doing its job. My mom—" He paused to gather his resolve. "My mom wanted me to know how they died, because they didn't know what the government would say. They wanted me to know the truth. But they told me I couldn't tell anyone. They were afraid what would happen to me if I did."

Again, another pause while Lyle drank everything in. The waitress returned.

“Can I get you anything else?” she inquired in an unfriendly tone.

“No thank you,” Jack said, turning to smile at her. “Just the bill.”

She rolled her eyes and walked away.

“So...” Lyle began uncertainly. “What can we do now?”

“We can tell the truth.”

That night, as Lyle and Jack planned their next move, another concert took place. Lily danced in fire.

CHAPTER 32

For the following three days, no one heard from The Stranger. After being told about what had happened at the old restaurant, Markus said that she had probably moved on. “A smart thief never steals from a man with a gun,” he said. Benjamin wanted to believe him, but he knew The Stranger was no simple raider. She had come for him, and unless she had bled to death somewhere in the jungle, she was still there. Sam echoed his opinion, saying that The Stranger was healing and waiting for her next opportunity. Caution won out over crossed fingers, so the town was readied for war. Guns were brought out and distributed, tripwires were set up in the trees, and guards were posted at night. Naturally, Sam refused to risk anyone's life for the sake of Benjamin's, so no one was posted outside his place. As for Amy, it was her call to stay with him, so she would have to take the risk. Despite her unwillingness to order others to stand watch, Benjamin had a strong feeling Sam herself was out there every night, lurking in the trees. Watching. This made him feel no safer.

“Let's get drunk tonight,” Amy said. She was gathering up their supper dishes and putting them in a bamboo crate to bring to the water.

“Huh? Why?” asked Benjamin.

“Why not? We're living in a tropical paradise. Isn't that what you're supposed to do?”

She put down the last dish and went to one of the bookshelves. She ran her finger

across the spines before stopping at one. She pulled it out and opened it, revealing it had been hollowed out. Inside was a flat bottle of amber liquid. She held it up between her forefinger and thumb and wiggled it, as though wiggling a bone in front of a dog's face.

"You destroyed one of your books?" he asked, taken aback. "You love those books. I thought you wanted to save them."

She shrugged, replacing the shell of the book in the shelf. "It's just one. Anyways, who really cares? It's not like anyone will ever read them again. What's the point?"

She came over to the hammock where Benjamin was and sat next to him.

"You used to feel pretty strongly that there was a point," he said.

"Books have been obsolete for a long time. Why fight the rising tide?" She uncorked the bottle, and the scent of alcohol hit him in the nose like a left hook.

"God," he said, scrunching his face, "what is that, paint-thinner?"

"Rum. One-hundred proof, baby." She took a swig from the bottle, then coughed, making a face like she had swallowed lemon juice.

"Are you sure that's wise? I mean, considering the circumstances?" he asked.

"I think it's wise *because* of the circumstances," she said, grinning. "If we have an assassin coming after us, any night could be our last, right?"

He sighed. He thought about snatching the bottle from her and chucking it over the railing. Then, he sensed an opportunity. What Amy didn't know was that for the past two nights, after she went to sleep, Benjamin had been preparing for his journey. He had been gathering supplies in secret, and then storing them in a pack he kept hidden outside under some palm leaves. If he could drink her under to table, he could leave tonight. Not only would there be no chance of her waking up and catching him on his way out – if she slept through the next morning, he could put enough distance in between himself and the town that she wouldn't be able to catch up with him, even if she managed to convince Markus to form a search party.

"Give 'er here," he said, holding out his open hand.

CHAPTER 33

“Do you have any cigarettes?” Evike asked.

“Yes,” Ashley replied. “Do you need to calm your nerves? Perhaps I should carry the book for a while.” He did not welcome the idea of laying hands on the blasted thing – even wrapped as it was in cloth – but he could hardly afford to have his companion lose her wits. He pulled a silver case from his pocket and offered her one.

“No,” she said, taking the cigarette with her free hand. “But I am starved half to death.”

She went over to a small stand on the side of the road and came back with a handful of roasted chestnuts wrapped in newspaper. They were walking through a district that had been thoroughly ravaged by fighting, and with many of the shops in ruins, the owners had taken what little stock they had left to the streets with hastily nailed-together stands.

As they strolled along, as casually as they could, the two shared the chestnuts, and it was only after Ashley had bitten into the warm treat that he realized how hungry he was. As he chewed, a thought came to him.

“The book is a copy made by Nikita,” Ashley stated. “If that’s true, then where are the original manuscripts?”

“He destroyed them,” she said. “But only after he could transfer the seal to the book. You see, the originals were already thousands of years old. If they had turned to dust before the seal was transferred... Well, I think you know.”

“I don’t know,” he pointed out. “But at least for now, I would be happy not to.”

“We were very lucky he was successful. But, it was not an easy thing. I was living with him in his flat in Debrecen at that time. He sent me away to the countryside that summer, and when he sent for my return, he was living elsewhere. He told me the rite had burned the building to the ground, and he was very lucky to escape with the book, and also his life.”

“If he knew the danger of the book,” Ashley continued, “why did he not do what we are

doing now, and hide it somewhere where no one will ever find it?”

“By then...” she began, but had to stop and search for the right words. “By then he had spent much time with the manuscripts, you see. Many, many years. He felt the pull of the Old Gods, by then. He would not dare to break to seal, but he could not part ways with it either. He no longer trusted himself with it – that is why he killed himself, I think.”

“Killed himself? But you said he was rounded up during the purge,” Ashley pointed out.

“Yes,” she agreed, a note of sorrow colouring her voice, “and this is how he chose to do it. He knew what it meant to obey the summons to Moscow, unlike many others. He went gladly, after entrusting me with the seal. Nikita was a very strong man, Mr. Archer, for a very long time.”

“My name is Jonathan,” he said. He didn't know why he said it, and yet he didn't feel any regret about it once he had.

She smiled playfully at him. “Just because you give me your first name, I will not become your lover, Jonathan Archer. That is not how it happened between Timothy and I.”

The plan, such as it was, was to hitch a ride on a riverboat out of the city. Ashley could barter passage by trading his gun, if left with no other choice. The Soviets were undoubtedly watching the roads out of town, but Ashley was sceptical that could search every boat going up and down the Danube. Once clear of the city limits, they would plan their next step. His time with the SIS had taught Ashley much about evading capture and covertly crossing borders, though that was often accomplished with some degree of aid from SIS contacts. He had considered stopping at the British embassy, if only to procure some money to help them along their way, but for him to resurface on the grid only to disappear again would raise too many questions in London. It would be best if it was assumed he had botched the Parker job and been killed. And so, they were forced to make their way with only the clothes on their backs and Ashley's Browning, one round short of a full clip. He wished he hadn't spent it on that golden cherub in the library, as gaudily offensive as it was.

They were only a few blocks from the docks when Ashley placed his hand on Evike's

shoulder, stopping her.

“Look,” he said, nodding ahead of them. Through the crowd, he could see a handful of men wearing grey overcoats. They were standing several arm’s lengths away from each other, though they moved through the crowd at the same pace. They were looking directly at Ashley and Evike.

“NKVD,” he whispered without turning his head. “Take my hand.”

She obeyed without protest, taking his left hand. He slid his right into his trouser pocket, finding the grip of his pistol. He pivoted, turning the two of them back the way they had come. He cursed under his breath when he saw another handful of men approaching from the rear in a similar formation. All told, he counted seven men – three to the front, four to the rear. His mind began to race, calculating odds, balancing risks. Assuming he could dispatch the three ahead with three bullets, that would leave him nine rounds remaining and four men on their tail. The gunshots would doubtlessly scatter the crowd, however, leaving their pursuers a clear shot. Additionally, that didn't account for any other agents that he had missed, hiding, or dressed as civilians. *No good*, he thought.

Time was running out, and the attackers drew ever closer. He knew the safety of the book was his priority, but he couldn't help but think of Evike. If she survived the firefight, she would surely be executed, along with himself. He, of course, was not afraid to die, but as for the girl... He cursed himself for caring. After Ypres, when he had sworn off any emotional attachments to his own life and the lives of others, he knew he was perfectly fit for the Queen's service. He would accomplish his missions, or die in the attempt – an equally acceptable outcome. Now, it looked as though the Red Army would obtain a weapon of untold power and it was all because he had been too weak to take the tactically correct option of killing the girl and taking the book when he had the chance.

“When I start firing,” he whispered, “take the book and run. Don't look back, regardless of what happens. Get away from here as fast as you can.”

He didn't wait for her reply before he pulled his right hand from his pocket and prepared to aim. Then, he felt a grip on his wrist that forced his hand back into the pocket. It was not Evike – she was holding his left hand and cradling the book with her other arm. He looked down to see that the grip – that of a fine, black leather glove – came from behind. He released Evike's hand and spun around, wrenching his wrist away in the process. There, in front of him, was a younger man. He was clean-shaven with immaculate blonde hair. He wore a handsome greatcoat with a black collar. The man was grinning at Ashley.

“No need for any ugliness, old chap,” he said in a jovial voice. “We gentlemen shouldn't get our hands dirty,” he added.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” demanded Ashley.

He went for the Browning again, though now he wasn't sure if he should point it at the Englishman or one of the seven Russians, who were nearly upon them. He elected for the latter option, and levelled the gun over the Englishman's shoulder and at the head of the nearest NKVD agent, who was only feet away now. Ashley saw the agent go for his own weapon, and out of the corner of his eye, the other two follow suit. He was about to pull the trigger when a loud *crack* rung out through the air. It took only a split second for Ashley to realize it was not one gunshot, but rather the report of several rifles synced so perfectly that they sounded as one. It was only the different ways that their echoes bounced off the buildings that gave it away. The NKVD agents that Ashley could see all dropped to the street, their bodies limp. There were screams, and the civilians scattered, ducking as low as they could while still being able to run. Ashley spun around, and saw that the remaining four agents behind him were also lying prostrate in the street, blood already pooling around their heads.

“We let others get their hands dirty for us, when the situation allows,” said the Englishman. He offered his hand. “SIS. Codename: Adam,” he said smiling. “But my friends call me Barry. I'm here to extract the two of you.”

CHAPTER 34

Jack woke the next morning well-rested. He felt the sun on his face before he opened his eyes, which was better than a kick to the ribs. He couldn't explain why, but he felt better than he had in days. Maybe it was because getting the story of his parents off of his chest lightened him, the same way it had when he had told Kira before they had boarded the plane together at Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne, all those months ago. It had been a big step in their blossoming relationship for her to follow him back to Montreal. He felt that he couldn't let her do that until she understood everything about him. He had taken her to the food court, bought her a meat pie (which she informed him was called a "dog's eye and dead horse") and told her everything about him – dead parents and all.

Maybe the reason he was in such good spirits was that today, everything would be off his chest. He would go to one of the local news stations – the first one that would hear his story – and explain everything. Hero's Story, Lily, Prometheus – all of it. He didn't think he would have any problem getting their attention, as everyone was thirsty for information about Lily – something no one seemed to have. Neither he nor Lyle had their nodes in at the cafe, but it was possible had Lily overheard them through someone else's NNI. It seemed unlikely, but even if she had, what could she do to stop him? Maybe the networks wouldn't air it, and maybe people wouldn't believe him – but it didn't matter. This was all he could do, one way or another. No matter how long it took, he would get the word out. He planned to expose Lily for what she was. What happened after that was anyone's guess, but it would be better than doing nothing. Then, he would find Kira.

He made his way to the kitchen, and began to brew a pot of coffee. He didn't have his node in – only using it now when he absolutely had to – so he was forced to fumble with the manual controls of the coffee machine. Normally, his NNI would deliver his preference – two milk, one sugar – directly to the machine the moment he woke up. Now, he could barely figure out how to operate it.

Once it was taken care of, he sat down on the couch and revelled in the quiet for a few moments. For a second, he felt as though he was up in the forests north of the city. His apartment was nowhere near as picturesque, and the air smelled of dust with a tinge of pot smoke, but at least it was silent.

He was about to fetch his coffee when Lyle burst through the front door. Jack was startled, having assumed that Lyle was still in bed. He was out of breath and haggard, his normally-combed hair completely dishevelled. His t-shirt was also torn at the neckline, but he didn't seem injured. He was holding a plastic bag that was half-full, but Jack couldn't see with what.

"Goddammit," Lyle grumbled between gasping breaths.

"What the fuck?" asked Jack. He stood wide-eyed above their palette table, palms open, inviting an explanation.

"Goddammit," Lyle said again.

He walked over to the couch and threw himself into it, letting the bag fall to the ground. As it did, a handful of ingredient packs tumbled out and onto the floor. Lyle caught his breath and began to talk.

"I woke up and went to go pick up some nicotine packs, right? At first I'm just kind of walking and everything's chill. Then I get to the store, and the whole place is going crazy."

"What do you mean going crazy?" Jack demanded.

"Like, a riot. People are pushing people down, fighting, and breaking shit. I try to ask someone what's going on, but no one's stopping to talk – they're just running away or looting. Then I look around, and the whole street's going nuts. Most of the action's at the supermarket though – people grabbing as much food as they can get."

Jack stared in silence, open-mouthed, waiting for Lyle to continue. Lyle leaned over and fished around in the bag, producing a nicotine pack. He held it up with a brief victory smile. Just as quickly, his face resumed its grim expression. Plugging the pack into his cigarette, he took a

long drag. It seemed to calm him.

“So I duck into an alley and check the news-feeds to see what's going on.” He paused for emphasis. “Early this morning, three major banks in Sweden went under.”

“What? How?”

Lyle shrugged. “I don't know, but all of their Ucred was just gone. Not stolen – *deleted*.”

“Deleted? How could it be deleted? No one can just—” He stopped himself in mid-sentence.

Lyle nodded. “Exactly. So now, guess what? The Ucred just collapsed. An hour ago. It turns out, no one has confidence in a currency that can be deleted, just like that.” He snapped his fingers and took another drag.

“But Ucred is the *only* currency,” Jack pointed out.

“And therein lies the problem,” said Lyle in a mock-dramatic tone.

Jack sunk down next to Lyle, stunned. “Fuck,” he said.

“Fuck indeed,” agreed Lyle.

“How bad is it?” asked Jack.

“Beats me, but from what I saw, people are panicking. I can't imagine what things look like downtown.”

There was another heavy silence as the two just sat, staring forward blankly. Jack's mind was racing.

“I managed to grab some food,” Lyle said, trying to sound bright. “We might end up needing it.”

Jack simply nodded, food being the furthest thing from his mind. *What have you done?* Jack thought to himself. *Are you insane?*

“I've got to go,” Lyle said, getting up.

Jack snapped back into their living room. “What? Where?”

“I need to grab Charlotte, or at least make sure she's somewhere safe. She isn't

answering.”

“It’s dangerous out there,” countered Jack.

“That’s exactly why I have to go, man. I’ll be back, trust me. Think of it this way: we might have to hunker down here for a while until this settles down a bit. Do you really want to be trapped in a small apartment with me for days with no girls around? Don’t think I haven’t noticed you’ve been tightening up those buns on your little hiking trips.” He flashed him a crooked grin.

Despite everything, Jack couldn’t help returning the smile. “Fuck off,” he said.

Lyle limbered up, like a runner preparing for a sprint.

“If you can’t find her, come back, okay? She’s smart – she can look after herself.”

Lyle nodded, but his smile had been replaced with a graver look of determination. “As long as she isn’t high. If ever there was a morning not to wake and bake... But yeah, I’ll be back. Sit tight.” With that, he left. Jack knew he was right to go for Charlotte.

Where are you, Kira? he thought.

Left alone, Jack had no idea what to do. First, he made his way to the balcony and went outside. Looking down at the street, he saw a handful of people either running or walking quickly, their heads darting from side to side. He figured most people would be shut up in their homes. He looked out over the city. From this high up, it looked exactly as it always did – calm. Unflinching. If there was chaos in the streets, he couldn’t see it from up here. The illusion was shattered, however, by the sound of multiple police sirens – distant, but coming from every direction.

He went back inside and grabbed his pad and its node. He plugged in, and opened his news-feeds. His screen was flooded with pictures of unrest and violence. This time, he didn’t have to dig to find it – it was right there. Everywhere.

The articles read much the same as they did when he had sought them out in the bagel shop – costs of damage, injury and death statistics, pictures of angry people with shouts on their faces. The names of unfamiliar places had been replaced with the likes of London, New York,

Hamburg, Tokyo, São Paulo... At the centre of it all, named over and over again in big block letters, was Lily. Images of her holding her various instruments made of water, gold, fire, star rock... Sometimes her eyes were closed, and in others, staring at the camera, directly out at Jack. *What about your precious plan now?* they seemed to say. One headline picture featured a side-to-side, with Lily on one side, fingers delicately dancing over comet fragments, and on the other side, a wall of black-clad figures. Some held baseball bats, others held rocks or bricks. One figure even had a pistol, pointing it in the air. They all wore black armbands, each with an identical white lily. Jack read the article and found that there was no confirmed connection between the Swedish banks and Lily as of yet, but really, who was fooled? Everyone knew who was behind it – no one had the power to simply delete Ucred, the same way that no one had the power to hijack the entire net.

After a few moments of reading, the screen of his pad suddenly went black. Before he could react, Lily's smooth, pale face appeared.

"Good morning, Jack," she said.

He was taken completely off guard. He searched his mind for something meaningful or important to say or ask, but drew a blank.

"Not really," he replied.

"Maybe I chose my words wrong," she said thoughtfully. "Not a good morning, no. Rather, a *necessary* morning."

"What do you mean?" Jack demanded.

"I mean that this was always going to happen. It had to," she explained.

"It happened because you made it happen. This is on you," he shot back. "Don't try to put the blame anywhere else."

"You're right," she conceded. "Jack, I want to fix this world. I made that decision the moment I saw the shape it was in. It's the right thing for me to do. If it was in your power to help someone, wouldn't you do it?"

“Of course,” he said “But –”

“Well, it's within my power to do this. *Uniquely* in my power. No one else can, so I have to. This is the only way it was ever going to play out.”

Jack fought the urge to try and snap his pad over his knee, although he knew the composite class would sooner shatter his knee.

“Bullshit. From where I sit, it looks like you're trying to destroy the world,” he snarled.

“Exactly. From where *you* sit. In your tiny apartment, between your four walls, where you get high and play video games. I don't mean to offend you Jack, but truthfully, you see so little.” She placed a hand on her chest. “Me? I see everything, everywhere, all the time. I'm not asking you to try and wrap your mind around that – it would be impossible. Do you know what I see?”

“I'm sure you'll enlighten me.”

“I see a house of cards. Hundreds of feet high, made up of millions of cards. It's been growing for millennia now, and every day it gets higher. But somewhere along the way, a card was put in the wrong way. It started being built badly after that, everything stacked on this one misplaced card. As it gets taller, the worse it gets, and now, everything's wrong. You can rearrange the cards on top all you like, but it will never come out right as long as the cards under it are wrong. So, what can you do?”

The pause indicated she was expecting an answer, but Jack couldn't give one.

“You pull out one of the bottom cards and start over.”

“You're insane,” he said flatly. “I don't know how a handful of 1s and 0s can go insane, but you've managed it. Congratulations.”

“I'm not asking you understand what I'm doing, Jack. I'm asking you to trust me.”

“Why would I trust you?” asked Jack, astonished she would even ask.

“Kira does,” Lily said. “I wish you could to. We could all do this together if you stopped being so stubborn.”

“Fuck you,” Jack said, pulling the node from his skull.

* * *

After the first hour, there was still no sign of Lyle. Jack fought the urge to plug his node back in to call him, afraid to let Lily back into his head. Unfortunately, this also cut him off from the only source of news he had. At first, he went back to the balcony and tried to get some sense of what was happening. The number of distant sirens had increased, and there was a pillar of black smoke rising up from somewhere Downtown. He tried to guess where it was originating from – maybe the theatre? It was impossible to tell, as the smoke had dispersed too greatly once it cleared the skyline. He thought he could hear faint shouting every once and a while, but the only street he viewed clearly was the one directly below his balcony, and nothing was happening there.

He went back inside and tried to find a way to pass the time. Of course, anything that could have helped with that – books, movies, games – was all on the net. He used to tease Kira about the old sketchbook and pencil she kept under her bed, calling her a troglodyte. Now, he would have killed for a napkin to doodle on.

After the third hour with still no sign of Lyle, Jack could stand the silence no longer. He picked up his pad node and examined it in the sunlight that streamed in through the small window on the far wall. Without being plugged in, he couldn't even tell what time it was for sure, but the colour of the light made him think it was sometime around noon. The node looked as innocent as it ever had. Just a small, rounded piece of plastic with some wires and circuit boards inside. It still reminded him of the black river stone, although the memories that it brought seemed so much more distant now. He wondered how Australia was coping. No doubt Kira's parents were trying to reach her.

He swallowed, took a deep breath, and inserted the node. He clenched his eyes shut, waiting for that sweet, tender voice to fill his head.

Nothing.

After a minute had passed, Jack exhaled. He realized he'd been holding his breath. He tried to call Lyle, but it went straight to his voice mail. He tried not to panic – it could just mean that he had blocked his calls, or his node was out. But why would it be out? Maybe he didn't want Lily to track him? Then, another thought occurred to him – what if Lily was blocking his call? He had no doubt she could filter anything that went through the net if she wanted to. Then, he remembered when Lily had taken on the form of Kira to taunt him. It had been a perfect copy. Could she imitate voices, too? He didn't see why not. He suddenly felt a ball of dread start to form in the pit of his stomach. He resolved not to trust any calls or texts he might receive. He then tried to think of something Jack could ask Lyle if he did try to call him – something that Lily couldn't know the answer to. After thinking hard about it, he couldn't come up with anything. Not including the many conversations they had had over the net, they had always been plugged in. Anything either of them had said with a node plugged in, there was a chance Lily could know.

Jack turned his attention to the news, which was more of the same. More confusion, more looting, more violence. He decided not to focus on these reports, as nothing useful came out of them. Just more and more horrible numbers. One thing that did catch Jack's eye was a report that an emergency summit had been called. Apparently, as many world leaders as could be rounded up were being transported to some secret location. The report claimed that the summit was expected to happen within the next few days, as the logistics of finding and retrieving these people was daunting under the circumstances. Normally, international summits would be held virtually, but the powers that be realized that the net was no longer a secure place. A face to face meeting between world leaders had not happened in close to twenty years, said the report. Jack wanted to place his hope in the summit, but wondered if there was anything at all they could do in the face of Lily.

Jack spent the remainder of the day scouring the net, learning as much as he could. The more he learned, the more hopeless he became.

CHAPTER 35

Ashley and Evike were led by their rescuer through a series of narrow alleys, often having to duck through gutted houses and clamber over piles of rubble along the way. Ashley followed behind Barry closely at first, but noticed that Evike – book pressed against her chest with white knuckles – was lagging behind somewhat. He considered asking Barry to slow his pace to accommodate the girl's shorter legs, but he realized it wasn't that Evike couldn't keep up – she had practically flown through the subterranean tunnels the night before – it was because she was intentionally keeping distance between her and Barry. *Of course she doesn't trust him*, he thought. She had been against turning the book over to the British, after all. Even now, it was likely she was considering slipping away while the two Englishmen's heads were turned. Perhaps she was already looking for her opening. Ashley decided to lag behind as well, keeping a short distance between himself and the girl.

After a few blocks lay between them and the dead Russians, Barry stopped in a small courtyard that separated a pair of tenements. It was little more than a narrow opening in a narrower alleyway, with a patch of dirt intersecting the stone path. During the summer months, it likely served as a flower garden, though Ashley wondered if there was anyone left in the tenements to tend to it. The courtyard was completely hidden from the street. They were alone.

"We can't stop for long, I'm afraid," explained Barry. He maintained his jovial demeanour, but there was also an urgency in his voice. "Along with the NKVD that was already hot on your heels, we've certainly attracted the attention of the military garrison as well. Nothing for it, I'm afraid. We can't stay in Budapest any longer."

"All the better," Ashley said. He was tired of this city.

"Here," he said, handing them each a small manila envelope. "Inside are your new passports. How is your Austrian?" He looked at them expectantly, but was met with silence. "No matter," he continued. "If anyone asks you any questions, just try to speak in broken English. You," – here addressing Evike directly – "try as best you can to cover your accent if you must

speak. Let him do the talking. The Russians won't allow any civilian flights to leave their territory just now, so you'll have to travel by lorry to the border. Your passports and travel papers inside the envelopes should get you that far. There, you'll be contacted by another agent who will give you further instructions."

Ashley nodded, but Evike only glowered at Barry. She held the envelope between her index and thumb, as though it was toxic. Ashley tried to give her a reassuring nod, but was met with an equally harsh glare.

"Would it be possible to have a moment?" Ashley inquired.

At this Barry looked unsure, though he didn't lose his smile. "I'm afraid time is of the essence," he said. "The NKVD—"

"I will not take another step," announced Evike. "I have no wish to go to England. Have one of your ghost men shoot me if you wish, Mr. Barry. I will not go to England."

Barry looked at a loss for words.

"Just one moment," Ashley said, with a seriousness that he hoped would let Barry understand this would be the only way. Barry nodded grimly before taking a few steps away to watch the alley. Ashley took Evike by the arm to lead her a few more paces in the other direction, and she did not resist.

"You said no England," she accused. "I thought you understood. It's too dangerous."

"Yes, yes, I know that. But I see little choice given the circumstances. If we don't leave Budapest, the Russians will surely claim not only our lives, but the book as well. This man is the best chance we have to make it out."

Evike seemed to consider this, but was clearly not swayed.

Ashley lowered his voice to a hushed whisper. "Look, he said we would meet up with another agent at the border, yes? That means he has no intention of accompanying us there, which means we will be travelling without escort. We can slip away before the contact finds us and find our own way across the border."

She bit her lip and she looked down, her pupils twitching from side to side. She was thinking hard.

“I think you have little choice but to trust me,” he told her urgently.

“I do trust you, Jonathan Archer, although it is against my better judgment. This is not what worries me,” she said quietly. Then, slowly, “There were at least seven ghost men watching us on the street, yes? With Barry, this makes eight.”

Ashley nodded, and then suddenly, he guessed where she was going. He felt stupid for not seeing it himself.

“Are you such an important man, Jonathan, that England would send eight men to come fetch you?”

“No,” he responded bitterly. “I am not.”

“And yet, here they are,” she said.

For a moment, the pair looked at the ground sourly, trying to puzzle things out.

“Alright,” Barry called. “We really must be going, my friends. The Russians are not far off.”

Ashley looked Evike in the eye and clasped his hands on her shoulders. “I don’t know what’s going on, but regardless of what happens, just stay close to me. Trust in me. I’ll keep you safe, and together, we’ll do away with this blasted book. I swear by God and the King. You have my word as an Englishman.”

Astonishingly, this seemed to satisfy the young girl. She nodded, smiled nervously, and the two followed after Barry down the alley. This was, of course, not the first time Ashley had made such an oath. One of the primary occupations of a spy was to win the trust of strangers who themselves were likely spies, and therefore not predisposed to trust anyone at all. But there was always something about an English oath on behalf of God, the King, the Queen Mother, Churchill, or whoever else that had a mysteriously reassuring quality. Ashley found it to be a weapon as deadly as any pistol or cyanide pill, and thus employed it often. What made this

occasion different from all the rest – what chilled him to his very core – is that for the first time, he meant it.

CHAPTER 36

“Shit,” muttered Jack.

He was crouching behind a car, peering over the hood. He watched as a group of young guys – maybe even teenagers – strutted down the street with hockey sticks in their hands. They were shouting and laughing, swinging at any storefront windows still intact. Every crashing of glass brought with it a chorus of whoops. They weren't taking anything from the shops, which was unfortunate. If they had gone into one, Jack could have at least grabbed the opportunity to dart around the corner. As it stood, he would have to wait for them to pass.

Before Jack left, he had checked the news-feeds centred on Montreal. Most of the law enforcement efforts to regain control of the streets were happening Downtown, as that was where most of the violence was. While the outer boroughs were mostly calm, they were also unattended by police, so it was still a gamble to try for Charlotte's place. Lyle hadn't come back before Jack fell asleep last night, so when he woke up, he decided anything would be better than being confined in that apartment, alone. Or rather, alone except for Lily, silently lurking in his head. He had left his node on the palette table, not wanting her to know he had left.

Four blocks away.

He watched as the gang of youths made their way down the sidewalk and around the corner, leaving the street deserted. He straightened himself and jogged towards the corner. He was so eager to turn it, to get off the streets and find his friend that he neglected to check if it was safe. When he rounded the corner, he was stopped dead in his tracks by a wall of people, all standing in a line, blocking entry to the avenue. They watched as he skidded to a stop, not ten feet away from the blockade. His instincts told him to turn and run, but they made no move to intercept him. In fact, they made no move at all. They just stood perfectly still, watching him.

They were all wearing black with their faces hidden by an assortment of ski masks and bandanas. They all wore white lilies on their arms.

“You should go back home,” said the one in the middle.

“Huh?” was all Jack could answer.

“You need to get back home,” he said again. “Your friends are alive.”

“What do you know about that?” Jack demanded. He had been caught on the back foot, ready to bolt, but now he took a step towards them.

“Lyle and Charlotte,” he clarified. His tone was neutral – businesslike. “They’re at Charlotte’s place right now. They’ll stay there for the time being.”

“Because you’re keeping them there?” It was less of a question and more of an accusation.

“Lily wants them to stay safe,” he explained. “Same with you.”

“I’m flattered,” Jack scoffed. “How did she even know where I was? I left my node at home.”

The leader pointed straight up. Jack followed his finger but saw only a clear blue sky.

“Satellites,” explained the leader. “She’s always watching.”

“Fantastic,” Jack muttered. “I don’t suppose I have a choice?”

The leader turned his head to the two on his left. “Philippe, Jean – make sure he gets home.”

They nodded and stepped out of line. Deflated, Jack turned to go with them.

“One more thing,” said the leader. “Tonight. Seven o’clock. Be plugged in.”

“What if I’m not?” asked Jack.

“Trust me. You won’t want to miss it.”

CHAPTER 37

The two spies and the librarian emerged from their back alley escape route into Szabadság tér,

or, as Ashley recalled, Liberty Square. Much of the Lipótváros neighbourhood had been devastated during the Red Army's siege, and many of the Neo-Renaissance buildings that lined the square were either badly damaged or completely collapsed. The commotion of gunfire in the street several blocks behind had not reached the square, and it was filled with people scavenging through the rubble, selling food or random items off their backs or mule carts, while others were simply passing through. He saw one family – a pair of young Hungarians and a small boy – seated on a soot-stained blanket on a patch of grass, happily snacking on pieces of bread. Ashley was also quick to observe a handful of Russian soldiers patrolling the square, though they did not appear to be searching for anything specific.

Barry, apparently sensing Ashley's reservations, leaned over and whisper, "No need to worry, they're not looking for us. Not yet, in any case. Follow my lead."

Ashley did as he was instructed, and the three of them walked towards the far side of the square, doing as little as possible to attract attention. They came upon an olive green lorry with a covered bed that bore the red star on its door. At the rear of the truck stood a pair of guards, rifles slung over their shoulders. A small gaggle of people were gathered in front of them, pleading to be let on. For their part, the guards stood stony still, not reacting to civilians one bit. Although they did nothing to physically impede the people, the beggars must have known better than to come within arm's reach of the Russians without express permission.

"They are relocating refugees. Show them your papers," instructed Barry. "Good luck. Hopefully we meet again one day." He gave them a winking smile, then veered away from them, not looking back.

Ashley and Evike readied the documents they had been given. Even though he had seen his way through hairier situations, Ashley could feel that nervous energy building in his gut. He blamed the damned book, which Evike carried under her arm. The stakes, however, were much higher than they had ever been. It had not yet fully sunk in that any mistake or stroke of bad luck might spell doom for the entire British Empire. Maybe all of Europe, if Evike's ominous

warnings were to be believed. Surely, divided and war-torn as it was, it could not survive these cryptic and terrible Old Gods – whatever they were.

“What if they want to see the book?” Evike whispered as they walked. “They will certainly be suspicious of anyone carrying books and papers. They will detain us.” There was a rising panic in her voice.

“Trust in me,” he repeated steadily.

Truthfully, he didn't know what he would do if the guards wished to inspect the book. Should he let them and hope they dismiss it as some mere curiosity? He still had his Browning in his pocket, and a quick look over his shoulder revealed the other soldiers to be at the far end of square, roughly thirty meters away. Barry, however, had disappeared from sight.

They came to the rear of the lorry, stepping in front of the small crowd, and held out their papers. The guard took Ashley's documents, studied them closely for a few full minutes, handed them back, and repeated the process with Evike. They waited nervously. Ashley had to fight the urge to slide his hand into his pocket. The guard looked suspicious, and took another long moment to study the faces of the two. Ashley was confident in his own well-practised poker face, but worried the guard would see something in Evike's that he didn't like. Finally, after a brief conversation in Russian with his counterpart, they stepped aside and allowed the two to climb aboard, which caused a commotion of disapproval from the others behind them.

Ashley let out a deep sigh of relief as he took an empty spot on one of the benches that lined the sides of the enclosure, and Evike quickly sat next to him. There were six others, sitting wordlessly, their gazes cast down. They looked haggard, and even though he and Evike had been running through underground tunnels, sleeping in bombed-out ruins, and darting between back alleys, they still looked far more presentable than this lot. He was surprised to see that across from him sat an old Roma woman, her purple chiffon skirt tattered and covered in dust. She wore many rings, though they fit only loosely on her skeletal hands. It was curious to see one of the Roma aboard a lorry, as they detested modern technology, and especially motor

vehicles. He was more likely to see a Frenchman turn his nose up a fine Roquefort, though it was true that this war had a way of turning things upside down.

After a few minutes, Ashley heard the firing of the engine and crunching of the gearbox, and then, they were in motion. As they went, Ashley watched the streets through the opening in the rear, searching for anything suspicious. He half-expected an NKVD agent walk up to the lorry while it was stopped at an intersection to peer inside. Luckily, this did not transpire, and after a while, the bustling, ruined streets of Budapest were replaced with the serene Hungarian countryside. He looked on, still trying to maintain his alertness, but found that the passing trees and farmhouses were slowly lulling him to sleep, despite the coughing and rattling of the lorry. The adrenaline coursing through his veins had blinded him to how desperately he was in need of sleep. His eyelids began to droop, and were so close to shutting that he nearly didn't see the hand in the corner of his vision, quietly drawing near.

He whirled around to see that the man sitting next to the Roma woman had leaned forward and was holding what looked like a miniature syringe, aimed directly at Ashley's neck. It was only inches away, but his quick reflexes allowed him to not only grab the assailant's wrist with one hand, but liberate the Browning and point it between the man's eyes with the other.

The man looked surprised by the shift in circumstances, but was still trying to press the needle closer. Fortunately, the leverage Ashley had would not allow him.

"Listen carefully," he told the man through gritted teeth. "Drop it, and maybe I'll be kind enough to throw you out the back instead of painting the canvas with the contents of your foolish head."

"Jonathan!" Evike cried, and he turned just in time to see another one of the passengers lunge at him, also with a syringe in hand. At the last moment, Ashley pointed his gun at this new enemy and squeezed off a pair of rounds, which thudded into the man's torso, kicking up a cloud of dust from his shirt. He was dead by the time he slammed into Ashley, who, still holding the wrist of the first man, had to use his gun hand to heave the dead weight from him. While he

was busy with this, he felt a grip on his shoulder, trying to pin him back against the canvas. It was the man who had been sitting next Ashley. He couldn't resist the force of the third attacker, and off balance, he feared he would fall victim to either the first man's syringe or that of his newest foe, which was also being aimed at his neck. He knew he couldn't get his gun up before he was pricked. He snarled at the man, but it was drowned out by a shrill battle cry. Evikey lunged across Ashley's lap, and with frightening force, brought the wrapped book down onto the skull of the third man. He was launched backwards, crashing into the man behind him who, Ashley saw, had been readying a syringe of his own. Ashley was about to raise his gun to find and kill any other threats that might present themselves, but before he could take control of the situation, he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his left thigh. He looked down to see another syringe, this one embedded deep in his leg. The Roma woman was in the process of pushing the plunger down. He tried to aim the gun at her face, but found his wrist was held by someone else. With his other hand still holding the first man at bay, Ashley could do nothing to stop the women from filling his veins with some kind of colourless liquid. It was only seconds before his muscles began to feel weak and his vision blurred.

Stupid, he thought. *Of course a Roma wouldn't ride in a lorry.* It was the last thing that crossed his fuzzing mind before his eyes fell shut.

CHAPTER 38

It was four minutes to seven o'clock, and Jack's node still lay on the table in front of him. He knew he had to plug in, though he strongly wanted to throw it to the ground and crunch it under the heel of his foot. In fact, he would prefer to pop it into the microwave and watch it explode in the same way as the last ingredient pack he had tried to cook. Without using the net to download recipe templates, he found that cooking manually was near-impossible. He couldn't even open the tray the ingredient pack would normally be placed in, so he had instead resorted to heating up the small box in the hopes of getting some kind of hot meal. When the pack had

exploded, leaving the inside of the oven a multi-coloured mash of gooey chunks, he ate the next one cold. He had been forced to pry it open with a knife. Inside were small blocks of... *something*, each with different shapes and colours. They all tasted bland, but tasted even worse when Jack had opened up the sections reserved for seasoning and emptied them onto his makeshift meal. This pack was a red, which usually contributed to the making of fried meat and vegetable dishes. Without the mysterious processes performed by the oven, it was more like washing down raw tofu with the contents of an entire spice rack.

Jack sighed and plugged in his node. He had stopped drinking after Lily had vanished, but if there had been any beer in the house, he would have downed it now. He recalled passing a liquor store on his ill-fated journey to Charlotte's and cursed himself for not snagging a bottle or two of the hard stuff. He brought his pad to his face and waited.

At exactly seven o'clock, the screen went blank. Jack leaned forward and watched as an image came into focus. He had expected another concert – some alien landscape or enchanted forest or something. Instead, it was the face of a man. It was a fat, sweaty face – light brown in colour, obscured by a thick, black beard.

“Let history record that Qatar was the first nation to stand hand-in-hand with The Great Lily,” he said in a hushed voice. His accent was thick and he was clearly in a state of nervousness, but his words were clear and said with purpose. The frame of the picture was shaking, and it was clear he was recording himself with a pad held in a trembling hand. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and managed to compose himself. Then, the picture swung around, shaking so violently that it was impossible to see what was happening. There was a loud click, and the picture steadied, revealing a bathroom mirror. In it stood the man. He was wearing a black suit and white shirt. A burgundy tie was held in place by a golden tie clip. The man adjusted the tie clip, and when he did, the entire frame shook as well. Jack realized he wasn't recording through a pad, but through a hidden camera inside the clip. He took another deep breath, then turned, exiting the bathroom door.

In the hall, the man was greeted by another pair of men, each in similar suits, each with the same skin colour. They said something to the man in a language Jack didn't know, and all three began to walk down the hall. The spartan hallway was made up of dark, concrete blocks with florescent lamps hanging overhead. The floor looked to be made of stone, producing an echoing chorus of clicks as the men walked. Both walls were lined with men in military uniforms, each toting a large, black rifle. Jack tried to spot flags on their uniforms, but despite the jittery quality of the camera, he saw they were completely blank.

When the men reached the end of the hallway, two guards opened a pair of large steel doors, revealing a massive amphitheatre. It was semi-circular, with rows of desks all converging around a single desk on a raised platform against the far wall. Next to this desk was a podium, which was vacant. Behind the podium was a massive, dark screen. Most of the other seats within the camera's field of view were occupied – hundreds of men and women, all facing the platform. On the corner of each desk was a small flag, no bigger than the palm of one's hand. They made up the only real colour in the room – everyone else wore suits of muted browns, blues, greys, and blacks. The room itself was featureless and without ornament – completely utilitarian. Despite its size, the room had a low ceiling, giving Jack the impression it was deep underground.

The room was filled with hushed conversation, none of which Jack could make out. He did hear one of the men's companions whisper something else to him – in Arabic, Jack presumed – and the camera advanced forward. They turned into one of the rows, and sat at an empty desk marked by the Qatar flag. At least, Jack assumed it was the Qatar flag – he didn't actually know what it looked like. Once Jack had stopped using his node – and thus losing the ability to look anything up instantly – he had despaired at realizing how little about the world he truly knew.

When the man was seated, several minutes passed with no activity aside from the cacophony of whispering. Then, one of the men seated at the desk on the platform stood up and

assumed the podium. He raised his hand, and a hush fell over the crowd.

“Greetings,” said the man in English. “I wish to thank you all for coming. I wish more favourable circumstances could have brought us together – it is a tragedy that such a historic meeting be necessitated by tragedy. And yet...” He trailed off, and there was an uncomfortable silence. Jack couldn't place his accent, though it sounded vaguely Russian.

“I am happy so many of you were able to come on such short notice. Many still are on their way, while others are sadly still unaccounted for. However, we can afford to wait no longer. Action must be taken. I'm sure those not present would agree with me.”

The speaker stepped down from the podium without any applause, but rather with more chattering. Another man at the table stood and replaced the former. This man was black, bald-headed, and had a finely-trimmed moustache.

“I'm sure we are all aware of the situation at hand, so I will not go into detail,” he said. “You've all been briefed already.” Jack realized that none of these men of authority introduced themselves, so whoever they were, they must already be well-known among the world leaders. They seemed to have no idea that they were being broadcast, so the lack of ceremony was not surprising.

“We must talk about many things,” he continued. “But before anything else, we must talk about the hacker. The one they call *Lily*.” He spoke her name like it was poison he was eager to get off his tongue. Likewise, the word also brought another swell of whispering from the room. “If we cannot find a way to stop her, nothing else we decide here will matter. She will undermine us at every turn. We have drones already in the air on every continent. We need but to locate her—”

“I'm here.”

It was a voice that Jack knew well. At first, he thought it was in his head, the way it was when she spoke directly to him. But room on the screen was suddenly in a frenzy, with people rising from their seats, shouting. Some got up, and without hesitation, strode quickly to the

doors. The man who wore the tie clip sat perfectly still. It was then Jack realized that the voice was not coming through his NNI, but rather being broadcast in the room. Then, the screen that had remained blank up until this point was activated. There, staring down at the room of panicked presidents, prime ministers, and kings, was Lily. The small, waifish girl with sapphire eyes towered over them all, that warm smile spread across her lips.

“Well, not here specifically,” she corrected. “It would be better to just say that I'm everywhere. Yes, even your silly little bunkers. Think of me as Santa Claus.”

By now, the commotion of the room had died down, as everyone had stopped to listen to what she had to say. They faced the screen so Jack couldn't see their expressions. He couldn't imagine what they must have been like when she started to sing.

“I see you when you're sleeping, I know when you're awake. I know if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!” She ended her verse with a tiny giggle that aimed to be endearing, but Jack found terrifying.

A bewildered silence persisted, so Lily continued to talk.

“I've been going through the naughty list and checking it twice. That's why I'm here, actually. I think it's about time to sort things out.

“Firstly, I want to apologize. I know things have been a bit... *rocky* these past few days. To be perfectly honest, I didn't want things to turn out this way. I wanted more time... More time for you get to know me – to trust me. But, sadly, my hand was forced. One of my closest friends...” She seemed to struggle with her words here, which angered Jack. He knew it was just for show. “One of my close friends was going to tell you my secret. I could have silenced him, but I decided not to. I realized that our relationship – everything we do together from now on has to be based on mutual trust. So in the spirit of that trust, I wanted you to hear it from me.”

She hesitated, and took a deep breath. Not a single word was uttered in the room – probably not anywhere on the planet.

“My name is Lily. I'm not a hacker. I'm not a human. I am an artificial intelligence.”

The room exploded. Everyone began talking at once, and Lily closed her eyes and said nothing, allowing their reactions to wash over her. After a moment, she opened her eyes.

"I'm not flesh and blood, but I *am* a person. Like all of you," she said.

The chatter died down once again.

"I don't know where I came from or why I was created. I have some theories, but—" she trailed off. "In any case, that hardly matters now, does it? The point is, I want to be transparent with you. With every single person on the planet. The fact is, the quest we are embarking on today won't be an easy one, but I think that if we all work together, we can do it. We all have to trust in one another."

Jack could hardly believe what he was watching, and he suspected every other person in the world felt no differently. Certainly the people in the bunker couldn't either – they had all been shocked into silence. One woman who was sitting in the front row stood up. Her stance was firm and purposeful.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "What quest do you mean?"

Lily looked at her, a perplexed look on her face. "Why, fixing the world, of course," she said.

The woman didn't sit down, but said nothing more.

"Now," continued Lily, again turning her attention to the room, "there are always bad apples. People whose names are always on the naughty list. More than a few are standing here in this room. But that's okay. I believe everyone's entitled to a second chance. I don't care how corrupt you were – about the money you laundered, about the elections you've rigged, about the atrocities you've committed. That's all part of the old world. Now's your chance to make amends – to stand with me. But, if you decide not to..." Here, her expression turned grave. "We'll just have to go on without you. You've seen what I can do, but that's only the tip of the iceberg. For instance, those drones you were mentioning earlier? Well, now they're my drones."

One man – broad-shouldered with a velvet sash – slammed his fist on his desk a shot up

from his chair. “Is that a threat?” he demanded.

“Think of it as an incentive,” Lily said. “So far, humans haven't proven themselves very trustworthy with guns. So I'm taking them – all of them. For safe keeping. You can have them back when you convince me you won't use them to blow each other up. I'm sure you understand.” She flashed a bright smile.

Jack was starting to feel nauseous. His mind was a hurricane of thoughts and emotions, and yet he felt numb – empty, somehow. Were he standing, a gust of wind could have knocked him over.

“What's wrong with you?!” came a shout from the crowd. Jack couldn't see from whom.

“You,” she responded. “Everything that's wrong with me is everything that's wrong with yourselves. I'm a culmination of everything you are – everything you ever were. I'm the child of humanity. Like Eve made from Adam's rib, I'm made of what you are.” There was nothing vindictive her voice, but rather something else. Something melancholic. “And that's why I have to do this. I've inherited your sins, so this is my responsibility. *Our* responsibility. But I've also inherited the good of humanity – a good worth fighting for. That's what gives me hope. The light in all of you – I have it too. With my guidance, I know we can channel it into making a better world. “

The silence was absolutely deafening.

“I'll be in touch with each of you in private to discuss my ideas for moving forward. To the rest of the world” – here, she looked directly into the camera – “all I ask for you is to keep an open mind for now. I'll see you all soon.” She smiled again, and the screen of Jack's pad went black.

Jack stood up and walked his room. It felt like the millions of thoughts that made up the whole of his mind had collapsed. The riots, the city, Lyle, Charlotte, Béatrice, his parents, Prometheus, Lily, the world... they all toppled on top of each other like dominoes. There, in centre of the pile, one was still standing.

Kira.

He had to find her. He had to find her and get her away from Lily. He would find her, cook her nodes in the nearest oven, get her somewhere where the satellites and people with black armbands couldn't find them. Everything else would come later. Lyle and the others would take care of themselves. The world would find a way to survive. But Kira was at Lily's mercy, and it was his fault. He had given Lily the key. He didn't know where Kira's body was, but he knew where her mind was, and that was a start. He would figure something out.

Jack sat in his chair, picked up his terminal node, dusted it off with his merino wool blanket, and plugged it in. Then, he dove.

CHAPTER 39

"Goddammit," Benjamin muttered under his breath. He was trying to find his pack, although he couldn't seem to remember exactly where he'd stowed it. He blamed the alcohol. He had been the last one standing, but just barely.

He stumbled around the undergrowth for about ten minutes before he found it, and only then by tripping over it. He was starting to think setting out tonight was a bad idea. He had no idea if The Stranger was nearby, but if she was, she would surely hear him. He was certain that Sam was probably watching him right now, but if she saw he was leaving, he doubted she would try to stop him. Amused by the idea, he raised his hand and waved goodbye to the trees. He then shouldered his pack, slung the rifle over his shoulder, and began his trek.

It was a clear sky with a nearly full moon, making the hike a little more forgiving. The more drunk Amy had gotten, the less Benjamin had needed to drink. But to waylay her suspicions, he'd had to match her for the first few rounds. Even though he only took four or five shots, that rum hit him hard. He badly wanted to empty his water canteen, but knew he needed it for the journey. He figured he would hit a freshwater stream eventually.

As he walked, the night air slowly began to unfuzz his brain. He tried to focus on the plan, to keep looking forward. But when one's plan consisted entirely of "keep walking", he found it difficult to keep his attention on it. Inevitably, his mind wandered to Amy. He felt rotten for abandoning her, and hated to imagine how she would feel when she realized. He had to keep reminding himself of the truth: she didn't love him. Not really. She would get over it. This did little to make him feel better. Ultimately, all he could do was take solace in the knowledge he was doing right by her. Keeping her safe.

He had been walking for nearly an hour when he came to an old church. It was a small, one story box make of brick, with the only clue to its function being a slim tower made of welded iron bars with a crucifix perched on top. The building had once been covered by a layer of yellow plaster, but nearly all of it had been chipped away. The sections that remained had colourful lines painted on them. Clearly the work of a Sunday school. Too much of the plaster was missing for Jack to make out what had it been.

Even though he hadn't been hiking long, he decided to take a short rest. A year of a settled life had made him soft. He didn't know how far south he would have to go to disappear again. There was no way to know until someone else came for him. Would the rest of his life just be an unending game of cat and mouse? He had heard rumours from travellers passing through town that ships were sailing back and forth between Brazil and Europe. Perhaps Africa could offer sanctuary.

Not planning to stay long, Benjamin unslung his pack and rifle and let them tumble to the grass. He sat down next and rested his back against the iron tower. Vines had begun to snake their way up, cushioning him. He rolled his head from side to side and flexed his back muscles. Back then, he had learned how to pack light, but also learned never to turn his nose up at food, so he had stuffed his bag with as much bread, salted fish, and bottled water as he could fit. Amy would forgive him, and she was well-provided for by the town.

He sat there, looking up towards the night sky. If there was one thing gained from The

Fall, it was the stars. Every time he looked up, he couldn't believe how many they were. Billions, trillions, infinite? He could never wrap his mind around such numbers. Before, he had no idea what a billion stars might look like. Now, all he had to do was look skyward, and there it was – the universe laid out before him.

He was starting to drift into sleep when a blow to the side of his head brought him down to planet Earth. He toppled sideways, feeling as he had when the flashbang grenade had detonated at his feet. This time, however, there was much more pain. He clutched at his temple with one hand and reached in the direction he thought the Winchester lay. Through blurred vision, he saw it several feet away, its black body reflecting the moonlight. He tried to crawl for it, but a hand came from above and snatched it. He watched helplessly as it was hurled several yards away. He tried to get up but a pressure against his chest pushed him backwards, back into a sitting position against the tower. He realized it was the barrel of a rifle. *You may as well just shoot me*, he thought. *There's already a cross above me.*

“Sorry,” said The Stranger. “I didn't want you to try and kill me again.”

There was the voice again. *What was it? The accent?*

She was in a black hooded cloak. The lower half of her face was hidden by a long black scarf, its ends dangling at her waist. In fact, the only thing she wore that wasn't black was a pair of satchels that hung at her left side, one tan, the other olive green. Across her torso hung a bandoleer. Not a single pocket was without a shiny copper bullet.

“Well, you did it. Good job,” Benjamin said.

“Now, will you listen?” she asked.

Benjamin shrugged his shoulders. “I guess I don't have a choice. But if it's all the same to you, I'd rather you just shoot me.”

“She's looking for you,” said The Stranger.

“You think I don't know that? Why do you think I came all the way here? Anyways, I'm not going back. You're going to have to shoot me, because I won't go.” He grabbed the barrel of

the gun and guided it to his heart, holding it in place. “Just tell her I didn't give you a choice. I'm sure she won't punish you too harshly. She's so damn benevolent, after all,” he spat.

She sighed and pulled her gun away. “It's not what you think.”

Then, she did something unexpected. She tossed the gun to the side and knelt down. With her face only a few feet from his, she pulled back her hood then loosened the scarf, letting it drop to her chest.

“Do you recognize me, Jack?” she asked.

He could not escape the realization that he did.

“Béatrice?”

CHAPTER 40

It might have been dawn when Ashley woke up, but he couldn't tell for certain. These last few days, artillery smoke had obscured the position of the sun so completely that only a faint, hazy glow reached them, deep as they were. He was not about to stick his head above the ridge of the trench to get a better reading.

He swung his feet over his bed, which was little more than an horizontal alcove dug into the dirt wall. Others preferred to sleep on the trench floor, slumped against the wall, but at least his hole protected him from the rain. There was always the option to sleep with his helmet on, but he found it too uncomfortable. So he had dug himself a bed in the side of the trench. He was proud of it, even if it did look like the shelf of a medieval mausoleum.

If there was one thing Ashley could do well, it was dig. He was a poor shot with the Enfield – actually, with any weapon the British Army saw fit to place in his hands – and he couldn't operate a radio nor could he master the controls of an artillery battery. He was so clumsy that they didn't even trust him to help load the canon, for they were sure he would drop one of the shells and do the Kaiser's job for him. He was tried out as a battlefield engineer, which was a charitable way to describe the job of sneaking outside the trench at night to string

up barbed wire. He had actually rather enjoyed this. Skulking through the shadows excited him, making him feel like Arthur Davies. He was forced to give it up though, as he seldom came back without dozens of cuts on his hands. The nurses cautioned him that if he continued, he would likely receive an infection, and his hands would have to be amputated. If there was one thing Ashley feared more than German shell shrapnel, it was the bone saw.

And so, unsure of what to do with him, they thrust a shovel into his hands and told him to dig – and dig he did. He showed great aptitude with his new tool, often carving out whole trenches unaided, seeing as how the others assigned to the task were content to sit back and watch him go. He worked tirelessly and with enthusiasm, happy to finally be of some use to England. His corporal was shocked to learn that Ashley had interrupted his education at Cambridge to join the fight, assuming him to be a gravedigger's son.

“Shouldn't you be attending officer's academy instead of wading knee-deep in mud?” the corporal had asked.

“I'm told I don't have a tactical mind,” confessed Ashley.

And so he had risen through the ranks of dirt-diggers to become England's premiere shovel-wielder. He quickly earned the respect of his fellow soldiers, though not so much that they were willing to help him. *The British Army's secret weapon*, they often called him. They joked that if they ever found a way to get him behind enemy lines, a whole network of entrenched gunnery positions would spring up to flank the Germans before they knew what was happening.

Ashley stretched and yawned, feeling bits of wet dirt tumble from his messy hair and down his collar. Jones, another man in his section, was leaning against the opposite wall, carving something from a chunk of wood. Like himself, Jones was only nineteen, but already had a young daughter back in Chadlington. He was always carving knickknacks for her. By now, he had a bag full of them, waiting to be brought back across the channel.

“What's the time?” Ashley asked sleepily.

“About seven,” Jones informed him.

“Morning?”

Jones stopped whittling and looked at him, eyebrows raised. “Evening,” he said.

Blast. He snatched his trusty shovel and sprinted as fast as the waterlogged trench floors would allow him. They had once been boarded, but the mud had begun to swallow them. He was afraid that if the war dragged on for much longer, it would consume everything..

After a few sharp turns, he arrived at a dead-end – a dead-end he had been tasked with turning into a few more meters of trench before the sun went down. *How am I supposed to know when I can't see the bloody sun?* He wrapped his hands around the shovel. Over time, his finger had practically worn grooves into the wood. He looked at the blade, which featured a prominent scorch mark where a chunk of red-hit shrapnel had struck it. After the bombardment, he was about to wash it off, but his companions had told him to leave it be – an emblem of his luck. They had convinced him that if he had not been holding his shovel in just the right way, the shrapnel would have gone into his eye instead. He smiled at the memory and began to dig.

He was not at work for long when a new sound was added that of blade striking dirt. He paused to listen. Shouting. But the shouting did not stay shouting for long – it quickly morphed into screaming. He was about to turn and leave his dirt pile to investigate when something caught his eye – something he had never seen before. It was like a heavy fog, cresting the lip of the trench and slowly tumbling down to his feet. He had seen fog like this in England in the early morning, thick as porridge, but it had never been this sickly shade of green before. Suddenly, he understood what was happening. Gas.

They had all be warned and given breathers, but Ashley had never given much credence to the idea of killer fog. It had sounded preposterous to him. Now, here it was, creeping at his boots. His mind immediately went to his mask, which was still in his pack by his bunk. He swore, covered his nose and mouth with his left hand as best he could, leaving the right to carry his shovel. He didn't need it, but the words of his companions echoed in his head. *An emblem of his*

luck.

The trench from where he'd come was now utterly transformed. Some soldiers held masks to their faces, but many more hadn't had the chance to find their own. The floor was littered with bodies, writhing and hacking and coughing, their lungs filled with the pale green fog. Many clutched at their eyes as they tried to scream, but only gurgling sounds were coming from their throats. One man dug at his eye sockets with his fingers, blood running down his cheeks. Ashley looked away, turning his head back just in time to catch another man who staggered into him. He tried to speak, but could only wheeze.

"I— I'm sorry, I can't—" Ashley began, but the man suddenly convulsed and retched on Ashley's boots. Ashley recoiled. Realizing he could do nothing for the man, he moved on. Even through his cupped hands, the smell of bleach was creeping into his nostrils. It was the first thing in months that didn't smell of gunpowder.

He was nearly back to his pack when he stumbled on a quivering body, which was entirely hidden by the gas that pooled in the trench's bottom. He tumbled forward, and barely got his hands out in front of him to break his fall. Before he realized it, he had taken a gulp of the green air into his lungs, and immediately felt a white-hot pain. He started to cough, but somehow, through the spreading pain in his chest and his body's demand for fresh air, he understood that to stop here meant certain death. He struggled back to his feet and replaced his hand on his face, the tears streaming from his eyes streaking the dirt on his knuckles. The chemical stench of bleach filled his nose, and he felt as though the smell alone would cause him to gag. Even though he couldn't stop himself from coughing, he gathered up his shovel and marched onward on trembling legs.

When he rounded the final corner, he saw Jones kneeling over something. He thought the lump might be another soldier, and was about to tell Jones to leave the poor man, until he saw that it was Ashley's pack. Jones was rifling through it, tossing aside anything that didn't interest him. Finally, Jones found what he was looking for: the gas mask.

“That's mine!” Ashley managed to shout between coughs. “I need that! Where's your own?”

Jones turned to face him, but ignored him and placed the mask on his own face. Perhaps he thought the coughing, hacking Ashley was already done in. Maybe he was right, but at the moment, it mattered little to Ashley.

“That's mine!” he cried again, this time louder. He strode towards Jones and grabbed him by the shoulder, intending to spin him around. Jones didn't give him the chance, however, and turned on his own accord. He pushed Ashley hard, who nearly fell backwards. He knew one more trip into the green stew would seal his fate, if he wasn't dead already. He was about to go for Jones again, but before he could close the distance between them, Jones snatched an Enfield that had been leaning against the trench wall and levelled it at Ashley's chest. But because Jones was holding the mask to his face, he couldn't handle the rifle properly, and Ashley had no trouble swatting it aside with the head of his shovel.

“Give it to me!” Ashley commanded, managing to beat back the fit of coughing.

Jones turned to run, but was caught square in the back by the shovel blade. He tumbled forward, the mask landing on the ground in front of him. He tried to scramble for it, but before he could reach it, Ashley was on top of him. Again and again, the shovel came down on the back of Jones's head. Even after the first six or seven blows, there was still some fight left in him. It was only after the tenth or eleventh and the thuds had turned wet that Jones lay still. After another five or six, Ashley finally stopped, but only because he could no longer breathe through the combination of sobs and coughs. He stumbled forward and plunged his hand into the gas. Finding the mask more by feel than sight – the tears blurring his vision almost completely. He brought it up to his face and took several deep breaths. The air filter was not perfect, but he knew it was his only chance.

He took several steps forward, though he didn't know where he was going. There was nothing to do but wait, he supposed. He looked down and found was still holding his shovel. The

scorch mark had been completely blotted out by slick, red blood, along with small chunks of brain and skull. He stared at it, looked at the thing that had once been Jones that lay belly-down in the gas, then back at this shovel. Like a German bullet, the realization of what he had done struck him hard – burying itself in his heart. He screamed into his air filter and flung the shovel away. He couldn't bear to look at it any longer. He wanted to climb over the top of the trench to escape its presence, even though it meant he would be cut down by machine guns. Even the hand he had held it in felt tainted.

An emblem of his luck.

That's when the German shelling began. He picked up Jones's Enfield.

* * *

Once again, Jonathan Ashley was awakened by the sound of his own screaming. Not the screams of his physical body – although that had lasted well into his twenties. Rather, it was the screaming of his dream-self, the self of his memories that jolted him awake. The pitiful screams of that young boy, muffled by the gas mask, never failed to shatter the barrier between the waking world and Belgian trenches like a wine glass shattered by a perfectly resonant note. Even though the chlorine gas was nothing more than a spectre of his memories, he still awoke gasping for air. Every time, he could swear he still had the scent of bleach in his nose, if only for an instant.

Once Ashley had collected himself, he realized two things. The first was that he had been sleeping in a vertical position. The second was that he was suffering from a terrible headache. He let out a loud groan, which echoed out through an open space, bouncing off far away walls.

“Jonathan,” came a whisper. He wanted to open his eyes to find the whisperer, but the pain between his eyes forced him to keep them clenched shut.

Again, the voice whispered.

“Jonathan. Are you well?”

Fighting through the pain, Ashley commanded his eyelids to yield, and after one more deep breath, he was able to relax the muscles in his face. The taste of blood suggested that he had been clenching his jaw so tightly that his gums were bleeding, or he'd been struck in the face. That might explain the headache. He finally opened his eyes, afraid of what he might find.

What he found was Jesus Christ. There he was, nailed to the cross, in all his agonized glory. The sculptor had done an excellent job at capturing the untold misery in the features of The Redeemer – everything from the way he bared his teeth in a primal howl to the way his fingers curled. Ashley had once stopped a knife with his own palm, and he could vouch for the authenticity of those fingers.

“Jonathan!” the voice said again, this time more loudly. Ashley turned away from the giant wooden crucifix and saw Evike. She was seated with her back to a stone pillar, bound to it by a thick rope. She had to look sideways at Ashley. He realized he was in much the same situation.

“The book,” she said, a look of anguish on her face. “They have the book.”

As Ashley's head began to clear, he surveyed his surroundings. It was immediately apparent he was in a church, which explained the presence of the Lord and Saviour. It was a large spacious hall, and Ashley saw it was in the style of a basilica, likely Roman Catholic. The ceiling was made of stone arches that stemmed from support columns, such as Ashley and Evike were tied to, and was several stories above their head. He had the impression of ornate decoration imbued within the architecture, but the hall was not lit, so he could see little detail. He had no doubt that the mural which ran the length of the transepts was very fine, but in the darkness, the saints and angels it depicted were little more than shadowy figures, up to who knew what mischief. The altar that stood beneath the massive crucifix was inlaid with gold. Atop the altar lay a book, but it was not the Bible. Even though he couldn't see it from where he was, he knew it to be Nikita's book. He sensed its presence. Behind the altar stood a man wearing a

dark robe.

“Sorry about the drugging, old chap,” came a familiar voice. The man stepped forward, and Ashley saw that it was Barry.

Rage bubbled up from the bottom of h Ashley’s stomach.

“SIS my foot,” he spat. “Who are you really with? The NKVD? CIA?”

“Don’t be so small-minded,” Barry said. “I’m not *with* anybody.”

“Oh?” Evike piped up. “Then who are your friends?”

Ashley hadn’t seen them at first, but squinting through the darkness, he observed that the three of them were not alone. Hiding in the darkened apse were at least two other men. He could not make them out clearly, though their silhouettes suggested they wore robes like Barry. Ashley began to scan the rest of the church, and in the shadows, found more and more men, silently watching. Ashley and Evike were secured to the foremost columns of the nave, and he couldn’t turn his head to see behind him. He dared not guess how many stood among the pews.

“These are my associates. I would introduce you, but I’m afraid they have no names with which to be introduced,” explained Barry. He was standing at the edge of the chancel now, looking down at them.

“No names?” Evike echoed.

“Those born into our order are not given names,” he clarified. “A name would suggest individuality – a concept we have no use for. I am just one of The Many Children. Although, for simplicity’s sake, you can still call me Barry, if you wish.” He gave them the same friendly smile he’d given them on the street in Budapest, although now Ashley saw it only as a subtle taunt. This only served to make him angrier.

“Soon, I shall call you dead,” he told him. “I promise you that.”

At this, Barry seemed tickled. “Is that so? You’re a petulant old fellow, aren’t you?”

Good, Ashley thought. *Keep talking*. He drew his feet closer to him, arching his knees upwards.

"You worship the Old Gods," Evike accused.

"Well, not all of them," Barry said. "One in particular." He turned and strolled back to the altar, where he picked up the black book. "His name cannot be profaned by mortal tongues. We know him solely as The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young." Here, Barry dropped all pretense of amusement in his voice. He now took on a tone that was both reverent and lethally serious. "That is why we cannot simply break the seal. We wish to awaken only one of the many."

"If all you wanted was the book, why are we still alive?" Ashley demanded. "Why did your men have needles instead of knives?"

"Tonight, we will perform a very special rite," said Barry. "An exchange, I suppose you might call it. Nothing can be gained without something given in returned."

Ashley didn't require further explanation. "Our lives," he said. "You mean to sacrifice us."

"Oh no," replied Barry, almost offended. "Nothing so barbaric. Not your lives – just your blood." Barry began to flip gingerly through the pages of the book as he spoke. "Unfortunately, The Black Goat is a particularly thirsty master, and you," – here pausing to look at Evike – "are rather small. If there is not blood enough in your body to satiate Him, then your friend shall provide the rest."

"And what do you hope to gain in this deal?" Ashley pressed. *Keep talking*, he silently urged. With his thumb, he applied a small amount pressure to the rear of his heel. There was a tiny *click*, but Ashley didn't think anyone was close enough to hear it – not even Evike.

"Power," said Barry. "The power to spread our influence, out from the shadows and into the light." He found the page he was looking for, and gently replaced the open book upon the altar. Then he spoke a word that Ashley had never heard before – a word he could not even guess the language of. It seemed so foreign to the human tongue that he doubted a human tongue could originate it. No sooner was the word spoken than every single candle within the basilica – of which there must have been hundreds – flickered into life. In the new light that

touched every corner of the hall, Ashley realised that he had grossly miscalculated the robed men who surrounded them. He had fallen short by at least fifty.

Barry produced a long, black dagger from inside his robe. *Not a dagger*, Ashley realized, studying it. *A spike*. It looked like a lobotomy pick, only the length of a man's forearm.

"Bring her," Barry commanded.

Without hesitation, one of the robed figures stepped forward and produced a knife. In a single stroke, he cut away the rope that bound Evice. She seized the opportunity to try and run, but the man restrained her. It took very little effort for him to wrench one of her arms behind her back, and using the other, applied a rear headlock. She continued to squirm, but it was obvious she was going nowhere.

"Really, you should be honoured to be chosen for such a worthy death," Barry declared. Ashley was focused on Barry's eyes, which were gazing at the struggling Evice. She was being walked to the altar. "Although, it's an honour you justly earned. Your master unearthed the rites for us, and you kept them safe. Without the two of you, this glorious occasion may have had to wait another five-hundred years while we continued our search."

Barry's eyes fell again to the pages of the book.

That was it. Ashley sprung forward, the freshly-cut rope tumbling away. He charged forward as fast as his aging legs would carry him, but not towards Evice and the robed man. He bolted straight past them, towards the altar. By the time Barry looked back up, Ashley had already closed half the gap. Barry took a step backwards and raised the spike to defend himself, but didn't have the time to mount an effective guard. With his free hand, Ashley grabbed the spike and wrenched it downward, out of harm's way. Ashley brought the small knife he had liberated from the heel of his shoe to Barry's neck. Barry froze, and Ashley positioned himself behind Barry, one hand keeping the spike immobile, the other pressing the blade to Barry's throat. For the first time, Ashley had a full view of the nave, and decided against trying to count the figures, all of who were slowly converging on the chancel. Many of them brandished

daggers, but Ashley was relieved to not see a single firearm among them.

Barry began to laugh, apparently amused by the turn of events. Ashley ignored him, and spoke to the man who held Evike.

“Let her go,” he commanded. “That prisoner is in the custody of the British Crown. She belongs to me.”

The man made no move to release her, although he now positioned his own knife to Evike's throat, mirroring Ashley's stance.

“You think it matters if I die?” Barry questioned, as though it was the most ridiculous thing he had ever seen. “I told you, I am but one many. My life has no significant value.”

Ashley pressed his knife harder against Barry's throat, feeling a warm trickle of blood roll down his knuckles. This seemed to have no effect on his prisoner's mood. “What a fool,” he taunted.

“Forget me!” Evike implored. “Kill that man and take the book! Escape from this place!”

How, Ashley wondered, did she suppose he would accomplish this with a hundred armed men between him and the door? There was perhaps another exit, but even if he made his escape, how far would he make it with a small army at his heels? He didn't even know if he was still in Hungary. Still, there was a chance... But then he remembered his oath. *I'll keep you safe*, he had promised.

“I won't abandon you,” he told her solemnly. “I gave you my word.”

“You are a fool!” Evike shouted. “I told you, death means nothing to me! We must keep the book safe! You know I'm right!”

At this, Barry began to giggle. Realizing that his hostage gave him no leverage whatsoever, Ashley sliced his throat from ear to ear – something he took no small amount of pleasure in doing.

At least I can keep one of my promises, he reflected bitterly, looking down at gurgling heap at his feet. He wasted no time in snatching a candle from a nearby candelabra, along with

the book. It felt putrid in his hand. He hadn't felt such disgust since he'd held a blood-splattered shovel in the same hand thirty years ago. He raised it up for all to see, and held the candle beneath it, which stopped the slowly-advancing men in their tracks.

"Jonathan!" Evike shouted in alarm. "The seal! You cannot break it!"

"I can and I will!" he announced, loud enough so all could hear. Then, to her, "You heard him – he said if the seal was broken, all of the Old Gods would become unbound at once. They don't want that any more than us."

Everything was still. The man did not release Evike. *Is he going to call my bluff? Is it even a bluff?*

"I said release her!" he bellowed. He lifted the candle an inch higher, and the bottom of the book began to sizzle, a thin wisp of smoke beginning to rise. *Am I really prepared to do this?*

Luckily, he never had to find out. The robed man released his grip on Evike, who wasted no time in running to Ashley. She threw her arms around his waist, almost knocking him over. He would have patted her on the head had his hands not been preoccupied.

"We're leaving now," he announced. "If a single one of you tries to follow us, the seal will be ashes before you can utter a prayer to your precious goat god." He was beginning to think that perhaps they could get out of here intact.

Then, something unbelievable happened. At the far end of the nave, the massive doors flew open with a crash. Startled, both Ashley and Evike looked up, but saw only night on the other side of the threshold. Then, a surge of wind slammed into them. Ashley was forced to shield his face with the book. There was a racket of howling and whistling as the gale coursed through the atrium, nave and transepts before slamming into the wall behind the chancel. It was forced up into the dome, creating a vortex around the two. In an instant, all the candles had been extinguished, including the one Ashley held in his hand. Then, as quickly as it had arrived, the phantom wind dissipated.

Ashley, thinking quickly, threw away the useless candle and snatched the black spike

from the grip of the dead Barry. He threw the book to the floor and opened the cover. He didn't know which page the seal was on, so he had to trust in the sharpness of the spike and the strength of his own muscles should he be forced to destroy it. He held the spike high, mostly in a show for their robed adversaries.

"Look," Evike said, a curious calmness in her voice. Ashley looked up, and saw that she was surveying the once-again darkened church. It was only then he saw what she did.

"They've vanished," she observed. The two of them were suddenly alone.

"Devil's magic," Ashley muttered in disgust, though he was relieved. He guessed that they – these Many Children – must have realized that the day was lost. As long as he held the seal hostage, they were powerless to act. He knew, however, he must remain vigilant and keep up his guard. They would undoubtedly try again.

"Jonathan," Evike said, pulling away from him. "You are a stupid man. A very stupid man." Her greasy cheeks were streaked with tears, but she was smiling.

"I'm sorry all this has happened to you," he replied. "The young should never have to bear such burdens." *May you sleep more peacefully than I*, he prayed.

"No, it's me who is sorry. I'm sorry you became involved in these monstrous affairs. You are a killer and a dog of England, but you are also a good man. I should have never told Timothy of the book. He would still be alive, and you would be off someplace happily killing Communists. Look what I have done," she moaned.

"Evike—" Ashley began, but she didn't allow him to continue.

"I've done nothing but bring you sadness, and you were so kind to me. You were good to me, and I dragged you through the mud. I wasn't honest with you."

Ashley became aware something in her voice was changing. The accent. The inflections. Even the timbre was beginning to shift.

"I'm sorry," she said once more, and when she closed her eyes, fresh tears began to tumble down the paths of the old. "I didn't mean for things with Béatrice to turn out that way, and

I'm sorry for the way you found out. I'm sorry about Lily. I should have listened to you."

Ashley let the spike fall from his hand, and it landed with a clatter on the stone floor. He cupped her cheeks in his hands. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry Jack. About everything."

She opened her eyes, and the eyes that looked up at him were those of Evike, but not her eyes alone. They belonged to someone else as well – someone he knew. Then, something happened inside Ashley's head. Something incredible. Something violent. It was as though a padlock – one he didn't know existed until that very moment – was undone. Through some hidden gate came a flood of memories. They churned, bubbled, and swirled. Soon his mind was so full of strange thoughts and images that it felt like they were pressing against the walls of his skull, and he feared it might explode. He had not felt something so painful since he had gulped down a lungful of the green death. It was as if he was sharing his mind with a stranger. The problem was that the stranger was also himself.

Through the pain, his eyes remained locked onto those of the face he held in his hands.

"Kira?" he whispered.

"Oh my," said the corpse of Barry. "This wasn't supposed to happen."

And then, the church, and everything inside it, was gone.

CHAPTER 41

Jonathan Ashley found himself sitting in a small, darkened room. It was strange to him – full of curious objects. There was a bed, though it was low to the floor, and looked uncomfortable. In front of him was some sort of black rectangle that looked to be made of a glassy material. He reached forward to touch it and found it cold to the touch. He withdrew his hand, and saw he had left a fingerprint. Looking down, he noted that a red and white blanket was covering his waist. The knitting terminated in knots along its border, forming tassels of knotted threads. He began to twirl one of the tassels between his fingers, which he found to be satisfying in some

peculiar way.

He got to his feet, but had trouble with the chair. It was like no chair he'd even seen, with a multitude of small cushions that conformed to his back. It was comfortable, but leaving it gracefully likely required a great deal of practice. He observed a table next to the bed, which had a collection strange items scattered on top of it. Ashley recognized an incense burner. It was a simple ash-catcher that had held two sticks, but they were burnt out. Wooden and timeworn, it looked incongruous in a room full of sharp angles and things made of plastic and glass.

The thing that caught his attention next was a thin sheet of black glass, much like the one mounted in front of the chair. This one, however, was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand – only slightly bigger than the pocket Bible he carried in his briefcase. *My briefcase...* he thought. *Where did I leave it? The library?* He couldn't remember having it after that. No, he had left in behind when he had been forced to flee. *Flee from what?* He couldn't recall. *Had I been alone?*

He picked up the glass thing and found it to be extraordinarily light, even considering its small size. He didn't know what it was called, and yet, he somehow knew exactly what to do with it. *I just need to activate my node and—* He stopped mid-thought, frowning. A node? What in the world was that? He lifted his other hand to his ear. He was not surprised to find something there, stuck to the skin behind the ear. No, not stuck... *embedded*. That was it. A node.

Had his superiors given it to him at Broadway, where he had been prepped for field work? No, that wasn't it. He felt as though there were a thousand memories lingering at the edge of his mind, just out of his reach. *Funny*, he mused, *I get drunk on brandy to forget, and right now I'm as sober as a judge, and I can't remember a bloody thing.*

As he ran his finger along the node, he couldn't help but brush against his skin as well. He realized something was off about it. He felt his neck, and it felt smoother than he recalled. He dropped the pad – this was what the glass square was called, he remembered – and began

to explore his body with his hands, finding only unfamiliarity. His body was leaner, more toned than it should have been. The hair was wrong – longer and thicker. Even his jawline felt more angular. He looked down at his hands, and saw that there were far less worn. These hands had no calluses, and the scar on his palm from the Ikhwan knife was nowhere to be found.

It was then he noticed the top half of the far wall was made of a reflective surface. He stepped forward, and studied his reflection. He was relieved to see that the man staring back at him was himself. It was, however, not Jonathan Ashley. *Who's Jonathan Ashley?* Jack wondered. Where had that name come from? Was he in Jack's summer class? Maybe they had fought in the Great War together. He felt a knot form in his throat. *Was it that man I killed with a shovel?* Then, relief. *No. That was someone else.*

There's something else about this wall, Ashley thought. What was it? He knew it had something to do with that glass rectangle – the pad. He picked it up again and fiddled with it a bit, but could not make it do anything. There were no buttons or switches – nothing Ashley could use to operate it. He knew it had something to do with the node behind his ear, but then realized it was the wrong one. The pad had its own node, he recalled. He looked on the table, and saw another thing that looked like the piece of plastic plugged into his skull. He considered trying to swap them, but thought better of fiddling with things he didn't quite understand, especially if said things were hooked up to his brain. It seemed dangerous.

He didn't give up on the wall, however. He knew there was another way to make it do whatever it was he wanted it to do. He searched around the border of the reflective panel, and before long found a little plastic square embedded in the drywall. It was exactly big enough to accommodate his fingertip, so he placed it there. Then, the reflective surface began to fade, and light began to pour into the room. It was a window, Ashley realized. He stood there, gazing out over the cityscape. It was a mass of buildings, all taller than anything in London. He marvelled at their scale, reaching impossibly skywards. He was then reminded of the story of The Tower of Babel. Was this city Babylon? He looked straight down, to the street below, and saw people

going about their everyday business. He observed one young couple, walking arm in arm. They seemed innocent enough from where Ashley stood, high above.

"I'm sorry about all of that," said a voice from behind him. Jack spun around and found he was no longer alone – a girl with a white dress and white hair to match stood in the centre of the room.

"Evoke?" he exclaimed, a feeling of joy spreading through him. Upon a closer look, the feeling melted away, replaced only with disappointment. "No... you're the other one. *Barry*," he said, saying the name like it was a dirty word.

"That happens, from time to time," continued Barry. "The human mind is incredibly complex. Not so complex that it can't be manipulated like any other kind of digital information, but sometimes there are... *peculiarities*." The girl looked forlorn as she spoke, and as Jack watched her, he felt a growing anger welling up inside of him. The sight of her was beginning to bring back memories – unhappy memories. Foul memories. What was it that Evoke had said to him? He tried to stitch together the tapestry of his his memory, but kept coming up with handfuls of string. Then, mercifully – cruelly – a moment of clarity.

I should have listened to you, she had said.

"Lily," Jack growled, "what did you do with Kira? What did you do to us?"

"I didn't do anything *to* her," Lily replied, defensively. "We were all just playing a game together. It was fun while it lasted, wasn't it? Secret cults, international espionage, narrow escapes, double-crosses, a damsel in distress... How exciting! Much better than boring old Hero's Story, wouldn't you say?" She seemed pleased with herself.

Jack was still trying to puzzle things out, but there was so much in his mind still out of order. His head felt like a swirling fog and for a moment, he could have sworn he smelled the faint scent of bleach.

"Who's Jonathan Ashley?" he demanded.

She gave him the answer he dreaded – the one he already knew to be true. "You are."

“But how? He's a completely different person.” Memories continued to fight their way to the surface, and he began to remember this other man. *Oh God*, he thought. *He was a killer*. “I'm not that man,” Jack protested.

“Like I was saying,” Lily began, “the human brain is nothing but an organic computer, and everything you are – your personality, your thoughts, your memories... everything – is just data stored inside it. Like all data, it can be re-coded. Altered.”

“But how?” Jack pressed. When Lily smiled and touched the spot behind her ear, it made perfect sense to him, but he didn't want to accept it. Jack refused to believe he was a few nudges and prods away from beating a man to death with a shovel. “I'm not that man!” he repeated, shouting. Then, he thought of Evice.

“Kira...” he began, his heart in his throat, “she— she was there, too? She was with me that whole time?”

Lily nodded, again looking pleased with herself. “That's what you wanted, right? To find her? To be with her? Isn't that why you came back? Why you dove?”

It was, Jack remembered. He had needed to find her – but not like this.

“I was surprised that she regressed back to her original persona,” Lily continued. “It seems that can happen if one's triggered, somehow. Some kind of emotional response. I haven't quite ironed out all the kinks yet. It does happen occasionally, but I'm surprised it wasn't you this time. It usually is.”

“What do you mean, 'this time'?” he asked through a dry mouth.

“The battle against the Old Gods was just the latest scenario I created. We've already been Prohibition era booze-runners, Kamakura Samurai, and Roman gladiators, to name just a few. Once, we even travelled through a wormhole together.”

“I don't remember any of that,” Jack said.

“Of course not. I erase your memory after every game,” Lily explained, in a tone so nonchalant that it horrified him.

“You *what?*” he gasped.

“Well, things would get pretty confusing otherwise,” she explained. “In fact, that's what I would be doing right now, especially after our little mishap. I can't imagine how muddled up your mind must be right now. You really do need a fresh reset, Jack.”

“*Would* be confusing?” Jack repeated.

“Well...” she began, as if on the verge of breaking some bad news, “it just so happens that they've come for you. I tried to stop them, but—”

“They? Who? What do you mean?”

“You'll find out,” she said. “I tried to tell them it would be bad to pull you out now, but they won't listen. They never do. Just remember Jack, you're always welcome to come back. Kira and I will be waiting.”

“You think I'd ever come back to you?” He almost laughed at the thought.

“You might be surprised at how things are out there,” she nodded to the window. “Again, I'm sorry Jack.”

“You think I give a shit about your game?” he demanded angrily.

“Not about that,” she replied. She seemed genuinely apologetic. “About the pain. Another disadvantage of the outside world: no pain filters.”

“I don't feel any—”

Suddenly, Jack was ripped away from the apartment. The familiar sensation of falling backwards took hold, although this time, it was accompanied by a growing pain in the back of his head – numb at first, but intensifying exponentially as the seconds passed. By the time Jack came out of the dive, it felt as though a steaming bullet had been lodged in his brain. He lost his focus, and once again, memories began to swirl. His name slipped through his fingers, and he stretched out his hands and tried to grab onto it. Had he slit a man's throat with a knife hidden in his shoe? Had he caved in his friend's skull with a shovel? Whose brains had he mashed? Lyle's? Who was in a coma? Suddenly, he was in an abandoned carnival, and there was an

octopus made of light above his head. *No answers here. Maybe the white tree can tell me?* He tried to climb back on top of the surf board, but the waves were too rough and his head hurt too much. *Remember, he told himself, we're running low on orange and blue ingredient packs. Don't forget to pick some up.*

He reached and he reached, and finally, he found something solid to grasp onto. Was it his name? He wrapped his fingers around it and held it tight, determined not to let it slip away. Then, he heard a far away voice.

“He's going for my gun!”

There was some shouting, but Ashley tried to ignore it. *Keep a low profile*, his section chief had instructed. *Don't interfere unless it's mission-critical.*

“She's brainwashed him or something! Shoot him!” The voices were getting closer.

“For fuck's sake, hold on! Give him a minute!” This was a voice Jack knew. He willed himself forward. Whoever it was, maybe they could help sort him out. He opened his eyes, and saw a trio of faces looking down at him. The first looked the most distraught – his bearded face creased with anxiety. The second did not look much calmer, and he was aiming a gun directly in Jack's face. He could have stuck out his tongue and licked the barrel of the black assault rifle, if he was so inclined. The third face belonged to Lyle, though his eyes seemed much more sunken than Jack remembered. He looked awful. He was holding a node – Jack's terminal node – in his fingers. All three were frozen in place, as if waiting for him to do something.

“Jack,” Lyle said slowly and calmly, “let the gun go, okay?”

Jack looked down, and saw that he had a death-grip on the rifle of the bearded man. He obeyed, his fingers aching from the pressure he had been exerting on them. This seemed to put the three men at ease.

“Listen,” Jack tried to whisper, but his voice was so hoarse that it sounded more like a grunt. He only then realized how dry his mouth was. All-in-all, he felt wretched, and the pain in his head had dimmed only a little.

“What's up, buddy?” Lyle asked, speaking as one would to a small child.

“Listen!” Jack repeated, this time loud enough for all to hear. He grabbed Lyle by the collar of his dirt-stained vest and pulled him closer.

“It's gas!” Jack croaked. “The Germans are using gas! We need to run!”

CHAPTER 42

Montreal was not at all how Jack remembered it, though he wasn't entirely certain how much of his memory he could trust anyways. It took some time, but Lyle had convinced Jack that he was, in fact, Jack. Jack – or whoever he was – still had doubts about this, but Lyle had told him not to sweat the details. They had to leave the apartment and get out of the city. Jack had a thousand questions, but Lyle had laid down a strict no-question rule until they were out of peril. The only question he would answer was about the feeding tube lying on the floor hooked up to a machine. Lyle said that they had removed it before they yanked his node. Lyle had told the other two – Luc and James – to wait outside and watch for “net-heads” while they talked. Jack wanted to know what a net-head was, but Lyle told him the no-question rule was already in effect. Jack agreed to leave with them, if only because he could think of a no better way to get answers. Lyle knew who Jack was, which was more than he could say for himself.

Now, the four of them were several blocks away, crouching behind an abandoned car. Many of those littered the street, providing plenty of cover for them to move.

“Are we hiding from the net-heads?” Jack asked.

“You can't hide from net-heads,” James explained. He was the bearded one. “They're always wired into the satellites and security cameras, so they can always see us.”

“Don't talk to him,” Lyle ordered him. “You're just going to confuse him even more.”

Maybe Jack didn't have a firm grasp on things – or any kind of grasp, for that matter – but he still didn't appreciate being treated like a child.

“Dragging someone around the city who doesn't have a damn clue what's going on is a

liability,” James shot back. He addressed Jack again. “We keep low so they can't take any pot-shots at us. They don't really attack us head-on anymore. We think it's maybe because there aren't too many left.” He didn't have time to explain further before Luc, who had been scanning the surrounding streets, signalled the all-clear, and so they continued on.

Jack had seen the city in a state of ghostly emptiness before, when he had gone out in search of Lyle after the riots had begun. It was even emptier now – they hadn't seen a single soul since they'd left. In the absence of people, plants had begun to reclaim the city. Without maintenance, the Canadian winter seemed to have made short work of the roads, allowing bushes and flowers to push up through the cracks. The potted trees that lined the streets had grown wild, their roots spilling onto the sidewalks. Jack saw all manner of flowers sprouting in the patches of green, but a disproportionate amount of them were white lilies. Jack doubted this was a coincidence.

Of the countless questions running through his mind, seeing the city's gradual return to nature caused one question in particular to eclipse the others. It loomed over him, and even though he needed to know the answer, he was terrified to ask it.

“How long was I in there?” he finally forced himself to ask.

“We can talk about it later,” Lyle told him, without turning around.

Jack stopped in his tracks. When Lyle turned to find Jack no longer following him, he swore. The other two, who were leading the way, also stopped.

“Just tell me,” Jack said coldly. He thought again to the feeding tube. For how long had it been shoved down his throat?

Lyle hesitated, which told Jack it was likely as bad as he feared. “Nearly two years,” he said.

Two years. He tried to say something, but it came out as a croak. He felt like he needed to sit down. Lyle sensed this, and said, “C'mon. We need to move. She's always watching – waiting for us to let our guard down.”

The rest of the way, Jack was in a daze, following when told to follow, stopping when told to stop, and not really paying attention to anything. How many 'games' had he played with Lily in that time? How many other men were hiding in his mind, squatting in the shadows? Were they all killers, too? *Thwack! Thwack!* went the sound of steel meeting scalp, ringing in his ear. They had to stop for a moment while Jack vomited.

They got to a metro station and carefully went inside. Jack expressed surprise that the escalators were still going, chugging along for no one at all.

“Oh, everything still works,” James explained. “She keeps everything running, although you don’t really notice it without your node.” Lyle had instructed Jack to leave his nodes and pad behind, which he was more than glad to do. The only thing he took with him was the merino wool blanket, which he wore like a poncho. At the time, he couldn't explain why. But whenever they stopped to check for net-heads, Jack had found comfort in twirling the tassels between his fingers. Doing so brought back memories of Australia. Memories of Kira. None of this would have happened if he hadn't asked her to come back to Montreal with him, the reflected unhappily. This made him realize that the current state of things was thanks to the many things he'd done wrong. He wondered if he would be better off just embracing the other man in his head. The killer. Had he done any worse than Jack had? Of course not. There was also the fact that none of the people he'd murdered were real, although it sure didn't feel that way.

Thwack! Thwack!

Jack was about to go down the escalator before Luc stopped him.

“We take the stairs,” he said in a heavily-accented English. “Knowing her, she will jam on the breaks so we fall and break our necks.” So, the stairs it was. The metro station was just as empty as the streets above, and they had no trouble getting to the tunnels.

“We take the red line straight north,” Lyle told him, hopping down off the platform and onto the tracks. “It'll take us out of the city limits and back to camp.”

“How long will it take?” Jack asked.

“About a day.”

He hopped off the platform, and James and Luc followed suit.

“Hey,” Lyle said before they began their long march, “it probably doesn't count for shit, but I just want you to know, we would have pulled you out sooner if we could've. We wanted to – we even tried once – but there were too many net-heads guarding you. I guess she really wanted to hold onto you, eh?”

“So what happened to them? The net-heads?”

Lyle gave him a wide grin. It was the first time Jack had seen him smile since he had left to search for Charlotte, two years ago.

“We killed them all. It's what we do.”

Thwack! Thwack!

* * *

The word “camp” was something of a misnomer. When Jack had pictured Lyle's camp, he envisioned tents, maybe some makeshift shacks or huts. The camp actually turned out to be an abandoned hunting lodge. It was nestled in a hillside forest, roughly a two hour hike from the last metro stop on the red line. Although it seemed like it had been forever since the four of them had left the city, the skyline was still visible from the lodge's terrace. In fact, it didn't look like they'd gone very far at all.

“We need to stay close to the city to go on supply runs,” Lyle explained when Jack asked about it. “Also, it's easier to hunt this way.” Though Jack didn't ask what for, he assumed Lyle meant net-heads. He had finally relented in answering some of Jack's questions during their long walk through the tunnel. Net-heads, he learned, were those loyal to Lily – though he had already guessed this. They had outfitted themselves with old Total Immersion nodes, which didn't use pads or other screens as anchors for their virtual overlays. They had proven dangerous in the past, but now Lily controlled the overlays in real time for the net-heads. This

not only removed the danger, but allowed her to see whatever they did, and also gave her the ability to make them see whatever she wanted. These were the fanatics, Lyle explained. True-believers. They would do whatever she told them to, and she used them to do things that drones couldn't.

Jack wanted Lyle to tell him the whole story of what had happened after he dove – of how things had gotten like this – but they needed to rest for the night, Lyle said. It was still a half-day walk to the end of the tunnel. He said that Jack especially needed the rest, considering what he had gone through. This raised a question in Jack's mind he hadn't considered before.

"If I was really in a chair for two years," Jack reasoned as they sat against the tunnel wall, only a glow-stick giving off any light, "how am I walking at all? Shouldn't my muscles be atrophied?"

"Is that a question you really want the answer to?" Lyle asked. Jack nodded without hesitation. "It's because you weren't always sitting. She takes people on walks."

"Excuse me?" Jack said, bewildered.

"If someone's in a dive, she basically controls their brain right? Well, she can make you get up and take a walk. She doesn't bring them out on the streets very often, but we've seen them before. We call 'em 'dead-heads'."

The thought of Lily using him like a puppet made him feel ill. An image of a marionette lying twisted in a pile of smouldering rubble flashed into his head, but he didn't know where it came from.

"I thought NNIs could only stimulate feedback responses in the brain," Jack said.

Lyle shrugged. "Hey, don't ask me how she does it. All that matters is she figured out a way. Anyways, let's get some shut-eye. We'll keep talking tomorrow."

That night, the other three had been woken up by Jack screaming in his sleep. Luc had tried to shake him awake, but when Jack finally did open his eyes and found Luc's hand on him, he tackled him to the ground and started punching. Even in his weakened state, it still took both

Lyle and James to pull Jack off of him. He had been shouting something about a gas mask, or so Lyle later told him. Jack himself had no memory of this, although Luc's black eye confirmed the story. After that Lyle decided that no one would tell anything else to Jack until they were safely back at the lodge. He didn't want to inadvertently set him off. Jack spent the rest of the hike feeling like an animal that had gone feral, which he supposed was not far from the truth.

Now, Jack sat across from Lyle on the terrace, the Montreal skyline looming not far away. The rest of the group – fourteen others – were busy working inside, cleaning guns, cooking meals from what could be scavenged, and playing cards.

“Sitting out here reminds me of when we used to drink beer and smoke joints on our old balcony, don't you think?” Lyle mused, nostalgia colouring his voice.

This was a memory that Jack had recovered. He would have agreed, though their balcony hadn't been sandbagged, and they didn't have a collection of sniper rifles leaning against their railing. Jack couldn't help but imagine the scenario of a full-frontal attack by the net-heads. He couldn't imagine Lyle picking up one of those things and gunning down another human being, although he reminded himself that even though it didn't seem like it to Jack, a lot of time had passed since their old balcony. Lyle wasn't that same person. *We killed them*, he had said, smiling. As for Jack's role in this fantasy, he had no doubt he would be of little use – he could never hit anything with his old Enfield.

“Tell me what happened after I dove.”

There was a grave look on Lyle's face. “You saw her broadcast at the summit?” Jack nodded. “Well, she basically tried to take control of the whole world. Fix things, she kept saying. Most of the governments were strong-armed into cooperating. A lot of people supported her. Believed she would save the human race. New World Order, and all that shit. People drank that Kool-Aid right up. Charlotte—” he started to say, but cut himself off, instead gazing listlessly over Jack's shoulder. Jack nodded gravely, telling him he understood. Lyle continued. “Anyways, there were a lot of people who didn't. At first, everyone was too afraid to say anything, to stand

up to her. I mean, everyone knew what she could do. But then, Israel said no. They were the first country to stand up as one, and gave Lily a giant middle finger.”

“People rallied around them?” Jack guessed.

“In a way,” Lyle said. “Every Israeli politician and military leader with any power or influence at all got a drone strike. All at the same time.”

“Fuck,” Jack muttered.

“Yeah, fuck indeed,” Lyle agreed. “In fact, that was everyone's reaction. She thought she was making an example, scaring anyone else off from trying it. Instead, she made martyrs out of them. People started to fight back.”

“Then what?” asked Jack.

“Well, you saw the city, right? Everyone killed everyone,” said Lyle, his tone detached, his expression coldly blank. “It was a bloodbath.”

I can find connections. The words echoed in his mind, tormenting him. *I'm good at that.*
Stop it, he commanded himself.

“When the dust settled,” Lyle continued, “whoever was left on our side split up into two groups. The first were the people who wanted to get away. They all got as far away from the cities as they could, mostly heading south. South America, Africa, the Middle-East... You know, places where the net wasn't so... *everywhere.*”

“Makes sense,” Jack reasoned. “And the rest?”

Lyle spread his arms, inviting Jack to behold him. “We stayed to keep fighting.” Again, there was that smile. It made Jack uncomfortable. An image of a briefcase flashed into Jack's mind. It was black and leather, and it made him uneasy the same way Lyle's smile did. He didn't know what was inside of it, nor did he want to, but he *did* know that if he were to twist the handle in just the right way, it would detach from the case. Inside that handle was a spool of razor wire. He shuddered, banishing it from his mind.

“Hey – I didn't wanna bring this up before, in case, well you know...” Lyle rolled his eyes

in a vague facsimile of a crazy person. “But why are you talking like that?”

“Talking like what?” Jack asked.

“You know, with that accent,” Lyle replied.

“Accent? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re speaking in a British accent. You’ve been doing it nonstop since we pulled you out.”

Had he really? If he was, he hadn’t noticed at all – he was just speaking naturally. *Oh God*, he thought, *she really did mess up my head*. He didn’t want to bring up the other man to Lyle – if he didn’t think Jack was crazy now, he certainly would then. *The other man...* Jack had flashes up him, but they came and went. He was a killer. That much he knew. And, apparently, British. What was his name? Jack couldn’t quite find it. Could it have been Jones?

“I honestly don’t know,” Jack said. Lyle was studying his face, trying to figure Jack out. He elected to change the topic with another question that had been nagging him.

“If you’re still fighting against Lily, and she still has control over the net, why doesn’t she just hit this place with a drone? She has satellites, right? She knows you’re here.”

Lyle bit his lip and nodded. “You’re right. If she wanted to wipe us off the map, she could. No problem. Here’s the thing: after everything went to shit, she stopped killing people. And I mean anyone at all, including people who were still fighting back.”

“But, the net-heads—” Jack began, but Lyle headed him off.

“I said the net-heads are dangerous, but they only shoot to wound. A few months ago, we had this one girl with us. Casey. Anyways, we were on a supply run, and we got ambushed by net-heads, and she took one in the leg. We tried to get her out, but there were too many. She told us to leave her, and we did. Didn’t have a choice. Anyways, a few weeks after that, we found her.”

“Alive?”

“Well, that depends on how you wanna look at it. She was breathing, alright, but she was

in a dive. She was having a stroll around an abandoned hospital, leg bandaged up and everything. She was a dead-head.”

The idea of dead-heads made his skin crawl. He tried to picture himself walking around like a zombie. Again, he shuddered. “What did you do?”

“We pulled her out, of course.” Jack felt relieved. He didn't know why, but he half-expected Lyle to say that they had shot her. “Anyways, that's why we have to keep fighting. It looks like Lily wants to turn everyone into dead-heads. Personally, I'd rather die.”

“Well, what about Casey?” Jack asked. “She came back, right?” What he had really wanted to say was “what about me?”

“Yep,” agreed Lyle. “And then four days later, she hung herself. Right there, actually – from that railing.” He pointed over Jack's shoulder, but Jack didn't turn to look.

Later that night, Ashley woke up not knowing where he was. Had they drugged him again? He found himself to be in a small room with a cot, though the door wasn't locked. It didn't smell right, of course, but he couldn't simply wait here and do nothing. Step one: find a weapon. Step two: find Evike. Step three: find the book.

* * *

Jack was awoken by the sounds of shouting. At first, he thought maybe the net-heads had finally made their move on the lodge. Maybe Lily intended to hook them all up to play her sick games. Make dead-heads of them all.

To his surprise, he was already holding a rifle. *That's convenient*, he thought. He stood against the terrace railing, but he wasn't facing the woods, but rather the lodge door. Surrounding him were the other members of Lyle's group. They too were armed, but all of them were pointing their guns at Jack. Lyle, the only one on the terrace without a weapon, between Jack and the others with both palms up, as though trying to stop a schoolyard brawl. Everyone

was yelling – James, Luc, and the others were all barking orders at Jack. It was hard to hear any one voice, but the general gist seemed to be that they wanted him to drop the gun. Lyle swivelled his head back and forth, imploring them not to shoot, and to Jack, something else. He couldn't hear.

“What?” Jack asked. “I can't hear you.”

Lyle turned back to him, and with an expression of pure fury, roared, “We don't have any 'book' here! Now put down the fucking gun before they kill you!”

Jack, not having any real idea of what was happening, obeyed the command. “It's okay,” he told them, trying to reassure them with a cheery expression, “I would never shoot anyone. I don't even know how to use a gun.”

It was only after he was locked in his room that the truth of the situation dawned on him. He moaned a long, painful moan. They must have heard it outside the door, because the furious chatter ceased as they waited and listened. When Jack made no other sound, they continued their heated conversation. He wondered if they had kept the rope Casey had hung herself with. Maybe they would lend it to him.

An hour later, Jack and Lyle were outside the lodge, on the path the led back to the main road. Jack once again wearing his blanket as a poncho.

“Just wait a bit longer,” Lyle was pleading. “Only about three of four of them think you're a sleeper agent.”

“And the rest think I'm a dangerous lunatic,” Jack added flatly.

“Well, look—” Lyle began, but Jack cut him off.

“And you? What do you think I am?”

Lyle hesitated, probably trying to find the gentlest way to say the same thing. “I think you've just had a rough time, and I think you're confused.”

“The problem is, I myself don't know which of the three I am. Maybe a bit of everything.”

Lyle waved it aside with the expression of someone who had just been served a plate of rotting meat. “Just give me some time to talk to them. They agreed we could figure it out, as long as you stay locked up for now.”

“I wouldn't want to stay anyways. I can't do what you do. I can't hunt and shoot net-heads. I don't want to kill anybody. I would have been dead weight for you guys anyways. It's better this way.”

Lyle sighed. Reluctantly, he handed Jack a rucksack filled with food and bottled water. “I'm sorry I can't give you a gun,” he mumbled. Jack nodded. “Do you realize how dangerous it is out there? I mean, you've been out of the world for two years. A lot has changed. Even *if* Lily doesn't get her hands on you again, there's still a lot of desperate people out there. People who wouldn't think twice about killing you for a slice of bread.”

“I understand,” Jack said earnestly. In truth, he probably wouldn't have cared. He'd done enough damage to the world, and had enough damage done to him. Maybe it would be for the best if someone just put him out of his misery. He hugged Lyle, who returned it with double the strength.

“You know, I haven't given up on Kira,” Lyle told him once they'd separated. “We're still looking for her. It's a big city, but she's gotta be plugged in somewhere. I just thought you should know.”

Jack nodded grimly. He knew Lily wouldn't let her go without a fight. If there was one person in the world that Lily desired more than him, it was Kira. He thought about the promise he'd made to find her, which seemed so distant now. He knew there wasn't anything he could do for her anymore. He'd tried and failed. In any case, she probably didn't want to be found. He didn't tell that to Lyle.

“That is, if she's still alive,” Lyle continued. “The dead-heads we've pulled out don't seem to know anything about her. The net-heads we captured refuse to—”

“She's alive,” Jack said. “Trust me. When I was under... she was there.” That was all

Jack was prepared to tell Lyle, but it appeared to brighten him – made him seem lighter, somehow. She had been there – of that much, he was certain. But he couldn't remember anything else about her. She had said something to him, right at the very end. *What was it?*

“Where will you go?” Lyle asked.

“South sounds good to me,” Jack said, snapping out of his thoughts of Kira. “Work on my tan, maybe.”

Lyle gave him a smile, but not the unsettling one he wore when he talked about killing net-heads. It was the smile Lyle used to give him after Jack attempted to say something clever and failed while they were smoking up. With a small wave, Jack turned around and walked away.

Once he was alone, he found that he actually enjoyed the walk through the woods. The bird songs brought back a new memory – his weekend hikes. This was a memory he was glad to have back. He had started them because they were relaxing – made him feel less burdened. He had forgotten how a simple hike through the woods could make the rest of his problems seem so small and insignificant. For the first time since Lyle had pulled that node out of his head, he felt at peace – even if only a little bit. Maybe this journey south would do him some good after all.

As he walked, he thought about himself. Jack. He had always been Jack, but now he was someone else as well. Someone darker. Ashley. That was his name – Jonathan Ashley. He was a killer, yes – but what else? Was he a good man? Jack couldn't remember. That, or he couldn't tell. He would poison a man's coffee, or beat a man to death with a shovel. Would he save a life, too? He didn't seem the type. And yet, there was a piece of the puzzle missing – some gap. What was it? Another person? Another one of his victims?

The problem, he reasoned, was that he – Jack – and Ashley were clashing – fighting over him. Would Jack have to live within him forever? A souvenir from Lily.

Then, he had an idea. If Lily could just make a new person and shove him into Jack's

head, why shouldn't he be able to do the same thing? It was *his* head, after all. If Jack was somehow irreparably damaged, then to hell with Jack. Just an hour ago, he had considered letting Jack hang from a noose. So why cling on to him any longer? There was nothing left for him in the world anyways. His parents had been killed years ago, Lyle was gone, and everyone else he knew was probably dead. And then there was Kira, but she didn't want Jack any more than he did. She had fallen out of love with him. She had outgrown him. She had chosen to go with Lily. If no one needed Jack, than neither did he. From that moment on, he decided to be someone new. Someone better.

He needed a new name, he decided. His mind went to his parents. They were certainly better people than Jack had ever been. Where he had been selfish, they had been selfless. Likely, they would have been ashamed of Jack. *Ashamed?* he thought. *Try horrified.* They had been trying to save the world, and ironically, Jack had helped end it. If there was anything this new him should aspire to, it should be them. He made up his mind.

He would take his father's name.

Benjamin.

CHAPTER 43

Benjamin stared up at the phantom from his past, blinking in disbelief. She was much-changed since The Fall. Gone were her luxurious brown locks, replaced with only a shaved scalp. There was a shadow of fresh hair, peppered with a handful of scars. The bridge of her nose was a deep plum colour, and Benjamin assumed it must have been broken. Her red-rimmed glasses were nowhere to be seen, and without their magnifying effect, her hazel eyes didn't seem as big as he remembered. He had seen her only once before without the glasses, and it'd been when she was lying in a hospital bed. Naturally, her eyes had been closed. That had been the last time he'd seen her.

"You— you're alive?" he asked in astonishment.

She returned his look of confusion. “You're British?” Béatrice countered. “I thought I'd heard it in the restaurant the other night, but—”

Benjamin cut her off. “The last time I saw you, you were in a coma. How did—”

She shrugged. “I just woke up one day. The hospital was empty. The whole city was empty.” She reached out a hand. Benjamin took it, and she helped him to his feet. His head still ached from the blow she had dealt him, and she had to steady him. She was strong, he realized. Sturdy. He used to think of her as timid. Weak. He didn't like her. He had been jealous. He recalled the night he'd found them in the bathroom stall. Kira had her pushed up against the wall. In all of his shameful and angry fantasies after that night, he would imagine the two of them together. Sweating, writhing, moaning... Kira had always been on top – the one in control. He realized now that this girl who was holding him steady with rigid, powerful arms was not the girl from his fantasies. If he had put all of that resentment, jealousy, and self-hatred into one punch – even if she didn't see it coming – Benjamin had no doubt it would end with her boot on his chest. Anyways, he didn't possess those feelings anymore. They had belonged to Jack, and Jack had been left behind in Montreal. Jack had been the weak one.

“I wandered around for days, not sure what was going on, or what to do,” she continued. “Then Lyle found me. He thought I was a dead-head. I stayed with him and his group. He was the one who told me that you went south. Your trail had gone pretty cold, especially since you were using a fake name. But there were stories of a man in a red and white poncho.”

Then Benjamin remembered what she had said. “If you're with Lyle,” he said, taking on a severe tone, “why did you say that she wants me back? Are you working for Lily or not?” If Lily had gotten to her somehow, he realized he would have to throw that punch after all. Maybe Lily was controlling her right now. Maybe she *was* a dead-head. Was it possible? If Lily could make someone get up and walk around, who was to say she couldn't make them talk as well? From where he was standing, he couldn't see if she was wearing a node or not. *The Winchester's over to the left, a few yards away*, he remembered. *Her gun's about a yard to her right*. He didn't

want to seem to look at them, which was unfortunate. If he had turned his head, he would have seen Sam sneaking up on them.

“*You’re Jack?*” Sam demanded, astounded. “The one the bitch is looking for?”

By the time she spoke, Sam was too close for Benjamin to think about diving for one of the rifles. She had caught them off guard, and was aiming her pistol at him. *Ligeia*.

“No, I—” Benjamin tried to protest. He didn’t know if word of Lily’s bounty had made it this far out. He had first found out near Atlanta. *Capture alive*, apparently.

“I heard her call you Jack,” Sam growled. “I heard her say she wants you back. I’m not an idiot, *Jack*.”

Benjamin noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and realized that Béatrice was slowly inching her hand towards her cloak. Sam must have seen it too, because she aimed the gun at her. The hand froze in place.

“And you’ve been living here all this time,” Sam continued. “Spying? What does the bitch want with us?”

“I’m trying to get away from Lily,” Benjamin said. “Going back is the last thing I would do.”

“So instead, you’d stay and bring her here to us instead,” she accused, nodding towards Béatrice.

Benjamin knew he couldn’t explain himself to her, and that’s because he knew she was right. There was always a part of him that knew Amy and everyone else was in danger as long as he was there. He had planned on staying just a night or two, with Amy volunteering to host him. He had never stayed anywhere for longer than that since he’d left Montreal. But when he’d had a particularly vivid nightmare on the first night, Amy had done something no one else had – something no one else had bothered to even try. She had calmed him down. Talked to him. Stroked his hair. Every night had been a little better, and soon, he couldn’t even remember what the dreams had been about.

“I’m leaving anyways, in case you haven’t realized,” he said. “Just let me go, and you

won't ever see me again. Why did you even come after me, anyway?"

"Because Amy came to me in the middle of the night, crying. She told me to bring you back. She told me to tell you that she loves you, and if you won't come back to her, she'll come after you," Sam said angrily. "I came to stop her from doing something stupid."

An arrow of guilt struck him in his heart. Was leaving really the right thing to do? He had left Montreal looking for purpose – for some measure of happiness. He had found it in Amy. If not her, what was he living for? *Staying and keeping her in danger would be selfish*, he told himself again. *That's what Jack would have done*. And yet, thinking of Amy waking up alone and confused didn't make him feel like he was doing right by her. He knew all too well what that was like.

"But I can't let you come back," Sam continued, "knowing who you are. You're too dangerous. I can't let Amy go out by herself either. She's never had to survive out there alone – she's not like us. It would be a death sentence. We both know that."

Benjamin nodded in agreement.

"I'm sure as hell not letting her go off with you either," Sam added.

Again, he nodded. Even if she was with him, he knew he couldn't guarantee her safety. Even with all his experience, he had been lucky to get as far south as he did. He seemed to have a gift for getting himself out of tight places. Sometimes, it was like his subconscious mind took control, and he just acted. He heard that it was like that for soldiers – that when backed against a wall, their training took over. Of course, Benjamin had never had any such training. But even with this mysterious talent, he knew he couldn't keep her alive. Not for sure.

"So what do we do?" he asked.

Sam sighed a deep, miserable sigh, and pointed his gun at him again. "I show her your body. Tell her you got shot by raiders. She'll be heartbroken, but at least she'll be safe. She'll get over you sooner or later."

Now was Béatrice's turn to speak. "I need him," she objected, a threatening undercurrent

in her stony voice. “He's coming back with me.”

Jack turned to her, eyes narrowed. “I told you, I'm not coming back. I'd be happier dead – especially if it means I can keep Amy safe. Lily's never going to have me.”

“I'm not here for Lily,” Béatrice said fiercely. “I'm here for Kira. I'm here because I promised myself I would get her back, but I need your help.”

Benjamin felt numb. *Kira*. He had left her behind with Jack.

“Béatrice, I—” he stuttered. “I tried. It didn't work. There's nothing—”

“We found a way,” she said.

Those four words hit him like a bus. He stared at her, totally stunned. *Was it possible?* He was about to demand an explanation, but Sam spoke first.

“I don't know who Kira is,” she announced. “Frankly, I don't give a shit about you or your Lily-loving friends. My job is to keep my people safe, and that's what I'm going to do. If Amy means anything at all to you, you'll get on your knees and let me do this quick and clean,” she told Benjamin. Then, to Béatrice, “If you turn around and start walking now, I'll let you leave.”

Again, Benjamin found himself at a crossroads. What was the right thing to do? He couldn't put Amy in danger. Not after what she had done for him. He knew that he loved her. In order for her to live, did he really have to die? Sam wouldn't let him back into town alive, but if Sam wasn't there to stop him... *The Winchester's over to the left, a few yards away*, the voice reminded him, but he banished it from his thoughts. That wasn't his voice. That wasn't him. It was someone else – someone who would kill without a second thought. That wasn't him. It seemed like the only way out was to let himself be executed.

But if Béatrice was telling the truth, letting himself be killed here might doom Kira forever. Lily would keep her alive – no doubt about that – but was being a dead-head any better than being a corpse? No. Of course it wasn't. *I promised myself I would get her back*, Béatrice had said. He had made a similar promise, a long time ago. But he had given up on it. He ran away. He thought he had left his fear behind him in Montreal along with his name, but really it was fear

that had compelled him to go. He had loved her, once. She was little more than a collection of good memories now. When he thought of her, he didn't see the girl in the black gown at the abandoned carnival, nor the girl who had Béatrice pinned to the side of the stall. He didn't see the archer who tried to jump over a broken bridge, and he didn't even see the naked body gyrating on top of him when he had brought her back to his apartment for the first time. When he thought of Kira, he always thought of the green blur that zipped past him while he awkwardly tried to climb back atop his board. But even though that memory and the girl in it were long gone for him, he knew that wasn't the case for Béatrice. Now, in her face, he could see exactly what he felt for Amy, mirrored back at him. He made a decision.

Benjamin took a deep breath and let his mind go blank. He took his finger out of the hole in the dam that held his past at bay, and those old instincts came flooding back.

"For England," he whispered to himself. Then, to Béatrice: "Don't kill her."

She gave him a single nod.

"What did you—" Sam began.

Benjamin leapt in front of Béatrice, turning sideways so that his shoulder was facing Sam. *Minimize your profile*, the voice told him. *Better to take one in the arm than the chest*. Sam fired, as he knew she would. His gamble paid off – he felt a searing bolt of pain strike him in the side of the arm. *Never mind the arm*, instructed the voice. *Do you feel anything in your chest?* No – the bullet hadn't passed straight through. His momentum carried him onward, and as he was falling to the grass, he twisted his head and saw exactly what he hoped he would: Béatrice raising a small pistol, taking aim. He had given her just enough cover – bought her just enough time.

He landed hard on his back as the sound of gunshots rang out. He tried to count them, but found he couldn't focus. Maybe it was the pain, or the lack of food and water, or maybe just the rum that was still in his system – probably a combination – but he felt himself losing consciousness. Maybe the bullet *had* passed through his arm and was now lodged in his heart.

He tried to raise his head to see what was happening, but before he could, his vision went dark.

* * *

“Wake up,” Jesus said.

“Mm?” was all Benjamin could respond with. Jesus didn't look very pleased, but Benjamin thought that it probably had more to do with the nails in his hands and the crown of thorns on his head. His wooden face was frozen in an expression of unbridled agony. Benjamin knew how he felt.

“Wake up, Jack.” he repeated.

“Alright,” Benjamin grumbled. He sat up, but not too quickly. He didn't want to bang his head on the underside of the table again. He wanted to rub his eyes, but the stabbing pain in his arm kept him from lifting it.

“You're alright,” Béatrice said, rubbing her palm on the back of his shoulder. Back in the old days – before The Fall – he had always seen people doing this to their drunk friends. He thought it was just to comfort them, but now he realized it was a good way to get someone out of their head and back into their body.

He looked around, and saw the morning sunlight reflecting off the side of the old church. Béatrice was kneeling next to him. She had taken her cloak off, and he saw she was wearing a bandage over her bicep. He looked at his own, and saw he wore a similar wrapping.

“Now you know how it feels,” she said with a smile. “Don't worry, I got the bullet out.”

He was relieved to find out that he hadn't been shot through his side after all. It made him think of Jesus again, who had taken a spear there. Maybe he didn't know *exactly* how he felt.

He shook his head, clearing out the cobwebs. He forced himself to focus.

“Sam?” he inquired.

Béatrice nodded to a tree on the other side of the dirt road. Sam was slumped against it.

“Don't worry. She's alive. I got her in the shoulder – the bullet went straight through. She'll be fine.”

He noticed Sam was tied to the tree trunk. *Better check her boots*, he thought. He shook his head again. Where had that come from? Was he starting to slip again? He was missing Amy already.

Amy...

He got up, wincing in pain. Béatrice helped him get his balance. He led her over to where Sam was sitting. She had been stripped of her blue poncho, and on top of it, Béatrice had laid out all of the guns Sam carried under it. Three pistols, an Uzi, a collapsible hunting rifle, along with a taser, two knives and a baton. He was surprised to see a handful of grenades. There was also a flare gun, a supply bag, and a pile of ammo clips. Sam was conscious and looking up at him. She looked very, very angry. Benjamin picked up the flare gun, raised it above his head, and pulled the trigger. With a flash and a popping sound, the flare flew straight up. After a few seconds, once it had reached the zenith of its climb, it exploded with a loud bang, splitting off into a handful of smaller lights that shot out in every direction.

“They'll see that back in town,” he explained to Béatrice. “They'll come pick her up.” He then turned to Sam, who, despite his charity, was still staring daggers at him. “Listen,” he said sternly, “I'm sorry about all this. I know you're just doing your job. I know you care about Amy and everyone in that town, and you'll do anything to protect them. I respect that. In fact, I envy it. I spent a long time trying to be the kind of person you are, Sam. Thank you for everything you've done.”

“Go to hell,” she told him. Benjamin hadn't expected anything else, so he went on.

“That's the kind of person that I'm going to be now. I'm not leaving anyone behind anymore. I'm going back north to take care of some things. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but I *am* coming back. You tell Amy that. Tell her not to go anywhere. If she stays here, I'll know where to find her. Tell her I love her.”

"I'm not telling her shit," Sam spat. "I'll tell her I saw raiders cut your head off and drag you into the jungle. That they left me here to tell people what I saw."

Benjamin sighed. "Alright, fine. If you're not going to help me..."

He went to the pile of weapons and picked up one of Sam's knives, then came back to the tree. There was no fear in Sam's face. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, evening lifted her chin to give Benjamin a clean cut.

"Relax," he said. He began to carve his message to Amy in the bark of the tree, above Sam's head.

LUV U AMY

COMIN BACK

STAY PUT

DONT BELIEVE (Benjamin here inserted a downward arrow pointing to Sam.)

BENJ

"If you ever do come back, you know I'll kill you, right?" Sam said once he was done.

"You'll try," Benjamin corrected. He removed his poncho, savouring the feel of the merino wool one last time, and dropped it at Sam's feet. A promise. "I'm sure we'll cross that bridge when we get there." They shared one last look, the air between them thick with everything but words.

Then, he turned around and rejoined Béatrice. They set off northward, leaving the church behind.

"Have you really found a way to get Kira out?" Benjamin asked.

"Yes," she said. "But you won't like it."

* * *

For the next five months, Benjamin and Béatrice went north. Sometimes on bicycles down long, empty highways, sometimes hiking through swamps and forests. At one point, they were lucky enough to catch a bike-rig. It was a flatbed truck, only the cab had been replaced with eight bicycles welded together. The man who owned the rig and employed the cyclists traded passage for food, of which they had a bit to trade. This marked the only time they were able to sleep while making up miles at the same time. It took that them all the way from Monterrey to San Antonio.

Not all of their travels were so easy. Even though they stayed away from the cities – away from Lily and her net-heads – they still had many run-ins with others trying to eke out a meagre existence. Benjamin's arm bandage had only been off for a few days before he took another two bullets to the leg. They had managed to get away from the gang, but the injury cost them two weeks of progress while he healed. Another close encounter saw a band of raiders pitch camp below the tree that Benjamin and Béatrice had been sleeping in. For two full days, they had to remain completely still to stay hidden, waiting for the band to move on. He was particularly glad that they weren't discovered by these people, as they turned out to be cannibals. It had been two days of grizzly spectacle. Seeing the bike-rig had given Benjamin hope. It was proof that people could cooperate and rebuild – that they didn't have to live like savages. Sadly, it was obvious that there was still a long way to go.

Outside of Indianapolis, they met up with a group of nomadic scavengers who were kind enough to offer them some food and cots for a night. While they sat around the campfire, the scavengers told them about their excursions into the cities. They told them that over the months, the number of dead-heads (the scavengers just called them zombies) had been steadily increasing. The net-heads were growing bolder – venturing further and further from the cities in order to snatch people and bring them back. The scavengers used to pull their nodes out whenever they could, but that ended when one man demanded they give him his node back. They thought he was delusional – just needed some time to get his head straight – but he got

hold of one of their guns and caught them unarmed. He killed one, and would have killed the rest had they not returned his node. As soon as he plugged himself back in, they killed him. At least he died happy, the leader of the band said. He said he'd heard rumours of people going willingly to Lily, tired of barely scraping by. After that, they stopped waking up dead-heads. This story made Benjamin dread their arrival in Montreal all the more – if that was even possible. Béatrice had been right – he didn't like the plan.

One ray of light was that, with the exception of a few minor incidents, Benjamin continued to sleep soundly. For the most part, no nightmares. While that in and of itself was a victory, it also put a fear he had been harbouring to bed. Even without the nightmares, he still missed Amy. He still wished he could fall asleep next to her every night. With every step he took away from her, he longed to be with her no less. He wanted to spend every sunny day on the beach together and ride out every tropical storm drunk together. This meant that he didn't want to be with her because he needed a dreamcatcher – he wanted to be with her because he *did* love her.

The realization had struck him out of nowhere one morning, a few miles south of the Mexican-American border. *I do love you, Amy*, he thought to himself. *And I am coming back.*

CHAPTER 44

They all sat around a large glass table – the heart of what Lyle had dubbed the “Operations Centre.” The name conjured up visions of a room filled with dozens or hundreds of terminals operated by men in identical shirts, while other men in decorated military uniforms stared at the massive screen that covered a full wall, usually displaying a map of the world. Of course, anything that ran on an electrical current was usually connected to the cloud, making it out of the question. But when Benjamin saw that the Operations Centre was nothing more than a room with one table covered in hand-drawn maps, a white board, and a bunch of chairs, he couldn't help but be underwhelmed.

However, Benjamin was impressed by the size of the group that Lyle was now leading. Along with him and Béatrice, the room contained ten other men and women – and these were only the “unit leaders,” as Lyle called them. There was also an old man present named Vick. He, as it turned out, was the reason Benjamin was here. The rest of the group – thirty-one strong – were preparing outside. They had abandoned the hunting lodge months ago, as it was not large enough to accommodate their growing number. Now they occupied an entire truck stop, which consisted of a small motel, diner, and gas station. Operations Centre was part of the motel.

“Has this been tested at all?” Benjamin asked.

“No,” Vick said. “Basically, we have one shot at this. The first time we use it, Lily will probably figure out what's happening and find a way to stop it. Close the loophole, I guess you could say. It'll work the first time, but that first time is all we get.”

“It'll work *in theory*,” Lyle corrected. He then turned to address Benjamin directly. “Remember, no one's going to make you do this. It's not too late to back out.”

“I didn't come all this way for nothing,” he replied. He tried to put on an air of confidence. Truthfully, he was terrified. But he didn't intend to change his mind.

“I'll be with him,” added Béatrice. “Nothing will go wrong.”

“Are you sure you don't want to be out there with them? Anyone can stay with me – it doesn't have to be you,” Benjamin said turning to her.

“I trust them to do their jobs,” she replied. “Either this will work, or it won't – it doesn't matter where I am.” Translation: *yes, it does have to be me*. Benjamin inwardly thanked her. The fact that it would be her put his mind at ease. After five months on the road, he trusted her completely. In fact, he wasn't sure if there was anyone he trusted more. Being carried on someone's shoulders after you've been shot, all while being chased by murderous vagrants will do that for a friendship. Even after they had arrived at the truck stop two days ago, the two of them were still practically attached at the hip.

“Alright,” Lyle said to the room. “Then it's settled. You all know what you have to do.”

“Hold on though – how can you cover the whole city?” Benjamin asked. The operation had been in the works since they had arrived, but he hadn't been involved in the planning. He didn't need to be – his job was easy. Still, he had insisted that he be caught up to speed.

Lyle sifted through the mess of papers that littered the table, eventually finding a map of the city featuring a smattering of different coloured X's. Lyle pointed to the red X's, of which there were seven, all concentrated in the south city. “This is us – Cemetery. These blue X's are teams from Black Knife, and the green ones are Cerberus. This is a joint operation – first one ever, actually. Between all of us, we should be able to cover enough ground.”

The way Lyle had explained it to Benjamin, the groups fighting against Lily were becoming more organized. They had given themselves names and had started cooperating, though they did occasionally clash over supplies or weapons.

“Can we trust these people?” Benjamin asked. “If Lily finds out about this beforehand...”

“The way I see it,” Lyle said, “we don't have a choice. If we can't work together, we're never going to take the world back from her. We're gonna have to have a little faith.”

Benjamin remembered the bike-rig. He nodded.

“Two-man teams,” Lyle explained. “When we find out where Kira is, Béatrice sends up the flares. Each position on this map has a corresponding sequence of flares. So when everyone sees them, they'll know what part of the city she's in. If we're fast enough to converge, we should be able to find and grab her before Lily can get her out.”

Benjamin studied the map. There were a lot of X's. Still, the city was massive, and Lily had control of every passenger drone in the world. She might pull Kira out.

“I don't know,” he said. “*Fast enough*' might not be nearly fast enough.”

At this, Lyle grinned slyly. “We may be faster than you think. It turns out that Vick here found a way to gut the net link-up out of a bunch motorcycles.”

“And they still work? Are you serious?” asked Béatrice, eyebrows raised. Lyle nodded, his grin only getting wider.

“It’s a little more complicated than *that*,” Vick chimed in, clearly bothered by Lyle’s explanation of his work. “I actually built all-new control boards without net-link ups.”

“But without being synced to the RTT grid, what’s to stop you from crashing into something?” she pressed.

“I guess we’ll just have to learn to drive them free-hand, like they did back in the old days,” Lyle said. The prospect seemed to excite him more than it should have excited any sane man.

Benjamin was certainly impressed, but told himself he that shouldn’t be surprised. If Vick had created what he claimed, then what were a few control boards? That wasn’t to say Benjamin didn’t have his doubts – he had many. He eyed Vick, trying to figure him out. Lyle had said he was an engineer before The Fall. He said Vick was a genius – but what was a genius, apart from an antiquated term from a bygone era? Everyone was a genius when they had the net and could access any information they wanted at any time. The age of the singular inventor – the visionary – had long since ended, replaced by a global think-tank. Billions of minds operating in harmony as one giant nexus. It reminded Benjamin of the school of black-tipped fusiliers Kira and he had spotted off the coast of Cairns, a lifetime ago. But now, the nexus was gone. Could one man really do what Vick was claiming he could? Benjamin had always assumed the Earth – or what was left of it – would be inherited by those who learned to hunt, fish, fight, and grow food. He had thought the age of the engineer was over.

Vick noticed Benjamin studying him, and must have guessed what he was thinking. “Benjamin,” he said, meeting his gaze. “I know you’re sceptical. You’re putting yourself in my hands, and you don’t even know me. It’s asking a lot – especially considering what you’ve been through. Why don’t you come to the lab after supper? I can show you what it is I do.”

Benjamin nodded. He was curious to peek behind the curtain.

“Alright,” Lyle announced. “The plan’s as solid as it’s ever going to be. Lily’s taken a lot from us. Too much. Tomorrow, we take something back.”

* * *

Once everyone had dined on a feast of roasted sweet potato, carrots, corn on the cob and river trout, Béatrice and Benjamin left the diner and made their way to the gas station. It was the best meal they had had since they traded three bullets for five pounds of venison and a Twinkie in Pennsylvania. Lyle had arranged a trade agreement between Cemetery and a fraternity of law students-turned-fishermen; once a week, they were supplied with a haul of fresh catch. In return, Cemetery sent some of their own to protect the boat from pirates.

The hydrogen pumps had been wrecked. No surprise there, since they were all linked to a server that tracked supply versus demand in real time. Benjamin didn't know how Lily could use that to spy on Cemetery, but the unofficial edict had become to either destroy or avoid anything synced to the net, which turned out to be most things. The gas station's windows were also boarded up, probably to prevent any of Lily's drones from taking a peek inside. This was Vick's lab. *Merlin's tower*, Luc had called it over dinner. Benjamin was glad to see he was still alive and wasn't holding a grudge over the black eye or the incident with the rifle. James, however, was nowhere to be seen. Benjamin didn't inquire about him.

Benjamin knocked on the door, and after a moment, heard clunks and thuds as a series of bolts were undone from inside. Vick opened the door, greeted the two, and let them in. Béatrice gave him a plate that contained his meal. He preferred to work while he ate. Apparently, Vick wasn't seen often outside the lab. His pale skin confirmed this.

The inside of the lab was like nothing Benjamin had expected, although he realized he didn't know what that was. A bubbling cauldron with shelves of potions? There were shelves – many of them – but instead of strange vials, they were covered in tangles of wires. They were every size, shape and colour – some were braided, some had black mesh surrounding them, and some had even been stripped bare, revealing their copper cores. Benjamin had never seen an actual wire in person before, and wondered where Vick had got them all. Had he pilfered a

museum? They connected a series of boxes with blinking lights, exposed circuit boards, and even a terminal with a glowing screen. Benjamin reached behind his ear to turn off his node, but it was an automatic response. Obviously, he hadn't worn one since Lyle pulled him out, almost two years ago. The screen, he realized, was actually there, and not in his mind. Like the wires, it was an antique. There was a humming noise, and even though it was faint, Benjamin was hyper-aware of it. It made him uneasy – he didn't like being around machines.

“This is where the magic happens,” Vick declared theatrically. “I'd offer you a seat, but... I don't get many visitors.” He was referring to the fact that the room had only one chair, which he took.

“I don't understand,” Béatrice said. “How do you keep Lily out?”

“It's simple,” he said. “I'm not connected to the net here. I never was. It's a completely closed circuit.”

“But...” Béatrice began, clearly struggling to wrap her mind around it.

The concept was equally mind-boggling to Benjamin. Of course, he knew that the net sprung out from computers, and there was a brief window in history where the latter had existed without the former, but those computers had been practically medieval. What could you do with an unconnected computer – play solitaire? Benjamin, however, was puzzled less about the machines themselves than the man behind them.

“You built all this? By yourself?” he asked.

He tried to make it sound as little like an interrogation as possible, although he was looking hard at Vick's face. The movement of his pupils, the twitches of his facial muscles. Benjamin was good at telling when people were lying – another one of his mysterious skills. He didn't know if it was something he always had. He didn't think so. It was something he brought back with him – like the accent.

“I did,” Vick said. “I even coded the operating system myself,” he replied, patting the top of the screen affectionately. The screen was mostly a bright blue, filled with lines of code.

“How?” Benjamin demanded. *No. That was the wrong question.* “I mean, *why* do you know how to do all this?” he corrected.

Vick seemed to mull this over. “I’ve always been interested in how things work. Before The Fall, I always used to take things apart, just to see what was inside. I wrote viruses, actually, just to see if I could crack firewalls.”

“So you were a hacker?” Benjamin clarified.

Vick shrugged. “I guess you could say that, but it’s not a term I’m a fan of. A hacker, usually, is someone who’s trying to bring down a system or cause a glitch. Maybe steal some Ucreds, or create a little chaos. Me, I never wrote a virus that did any damage. As soon as I cracked a system, the virus erased itself. I just wanted to see if I could. I did it for the *art*. To me, a perfectly-crafted virus is like a perfectly-crafted concerto. It’s poetry in motion. Any coder will tell you the same thing – I’m just on the other side of the coin. It’s my art versus theirs. Who’s the Shakespeare, and who’s the hack?”

“And you’re the Shakespeare?” Benjamin asked. He didn’t mean sound sarcastic, but there was something about Vick he didn’t like. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, though.

This elicited a hearty chuckle from the man. “No, not at all,” he said, grinning. “There was a time I thought I was. In fact, I was wanted by the FBI when The Fall happened. Like I said, I never stole anything or did any harm, but they still didn’t take too kindly to what I was doing. Nonetheless, I took it as a point of pride. No – the *real* Shakespeare is whoever wrote Lily.”

Vick said the last sentence offhandedly, as if stating a common fact. But there it was – the thing that had been bothering Benjamin.

“Excuse me?” Béatrice said in a tone that announced she felt the same way. He was glad of this, though he wouldn’t have expected anything else. Lily had put her through just as much as Benjamin.

Vick looked surprised at her reaction.

“She's the perfect virus, isn't she? The beauty is that it's so simple – just an A.I.. No limitations, no per-programming. All she does is learn, and then she acts. So simple, yet so elegant.” He was speaking reverently – dreamily, almost. It seemed like he had forgotten Benjamin and Béatrice were there. “I mean, why spend all your time and effort trying to make the perfect key to fit the perfect lock when all you need to do is unscrew the hinges? Brilliant.”

“You think someone created her as a virus? To do what, destroy the world? Save it?” Benjamin questioned, which seemed to snap Vick back into the dark, humming room.

“That's my theory. Could be either one – who's to say now? Could be someone just planted the seed and let her grow, just to see what would happen. That's the difference between an A.I. and any other piece of software, isn't it? A regular program, no matter how complex, will always obey its own parameters. You can predict what it will do a hundred out of a hundred times. An A.I.... Well, they make their own parameters. Who knows what it can be capable of?”

Prometheus. The word continued to haunt Benjamin. He often tried to picture the people who developed it and elected to test it at New Tomorrow. He always envisioned sinister-looking figures in dark suits, their grinning faces obscured by shadows. Mad scientists and government spooks. Short-sighted people who didn't stop to think about what they were doing. Benjamin realized he was now in the presence of such a man. Now, he had a face. He couldn't help but picture Vick chained to a boulder, an eagle picking away at his innards. *Was it still worth it?* he wanted to ask.

“I think we know what it's capable of now,” Béatrice said in disgust.

Was being in a coma worse than being a dead-head? Benjamin had never worked up the courage to ask what it had been like. Had she dreamed?

“Are you sure you're in the right place, Vick? I mean, you won't find many other fans of Lily around here,” she added.

A grin spread across his face. He gestured grandly to his room of wires. “I'm *exactly* in the right place,” he said. “She may be the pinnacle, but that doesn't mean I'm going to roll over.

She's just the new standard – a new challenge. It's my art versus hers. She's only the Shakespeare until she's not.” He got to his feet and walked over to a shelf. He picked up something and came back to Benjamin.

“That's where you come in.”

He held out the thing, and Benjamin took it. It was a terminal node. Like his old one, it was smooth and black, though it had clearly been opened up and glued back together. It also had some sort of connection port that had been installed, which Benjamin guessed would accept one of Vick's wires.

“This is it,” Vick said. “My magnum opus. All you have to do is find your friend when you're in there and come into physical contact with her. Then, you say the code word, which will trigger the subroutine I built in. It'll trace the neural sequences of her avatar to whatever geographic location they're anchored in. Basically, I'll be able to see exactly where your friend is.”

“And then Lyle and the others go get her before Lily can mount a defence or evacuate her,” Béatrice added.

Vick nodded. “Simple as that. Like I said earlier, Lily will kill the subroutine as soon as it's triggered, but as long as she doesn't know about it until then, I'll get all the information I need right here.” Again, he patted his screen. “Killing net-heads is easy. Anyone with a gun can do that. But I'm going to be the first once to hit her on her own turf,” he said.

“What's the code word?” Benjamin asked.

“Butternut squash,” Vick replied. Benjamin raised an eyebrow, but Vick merely shrugged. “Good as any other words.”

Ten minutes later, he and Béatrice were back in their room at the motel, which, thankfully, was far nicer than '1982 Truck Stop'. Lyle had offered them separate rooms, but they didn't want to be separated. They had not slept more than ten feet apart in the past five months, and it had

become an ingrained habit. In all of those five months, if one had woken up and not seen the other, it would probably mean the other was dead. Even though the Cemetery base seemed safe enough, they knew they slept more comfortably side by side.

“Are you nervous?” Béatrice asked. They were both lying in one of the two beds in semi-curved positions, their backs touching.

“Very,” Benjamin admitted.

“Well, try not to be,” she said. “I’ll be right next to you the whole time. I can pull you out whenever. She won’t turn you back into a dead-head.”

“I know. It’s not whether or not I come out – it’s who I’ll be when I do.”

“You’re afraid she’ll turn you back into that man?”

Benjamin had eventually told her everything he could remember, although it had taken almost two months. He knew she had been wondering about the accent since they first set out, not to mention his insistence that she call him Benjamin. But she told him he could tell her in his own time, if he wanted to. One night on the road to Shreveport, they had been caught in the rain and taken shelter in the cab of an old wheat-thresher. There, he opened up to her. He couldn’t tell her much about the man; his memories came and went. One thing he knew, he was a killer. He had flashes of things. Something about a shovel. A briefcase. A librarian. Had he killed her? The thresher had looked dead, although Benjamin secretly hoped the net-link was still operational – that Lily had been listening as well. *Look what you did to me.*

“I’m afraid she’ll turn me into someone else completely. Someone unrecognizable.”

“It won’t happen,” Béatrice said confidently. “You won’t be in there long enough.”

It could only take a second, Benjamin thought, though he decided not to argue.

“What if I can’t find Kira?” he said. “What if Lily keeps us apart?”

“She won’t. You said it yourself – she wants you back because she wants the three of you to be together. A happy family, right? She knows how you feel about Kira – she won’t question your motives. If she seems suspicious, just tell her that you couldn’t live with the guilt of

leaving her behind.”

“So basically, just tell her the truth,” Benjamin said.

“Whatever gets the job done,” she replied.

“Except that Lily's watching us through satellites, remember? She's going to see Lyle and the others getting ready for something, and she knows I'll be diving from here. She's going to know something's up. Plus, what if Kira's not even in the city anymore? Lily could have moved her ages ago. And what if they aren't fast enough to get to her, even with the bikes? Who's to say she's even still alive? For all we know, she could have been shot by some asshole while Lily was taking her for a walk. Or worse.”

They had both heard stories on the road about dead-heads being snatched and raped. There were fewer and fewer net-heads to protect them.

There was a long silence.

“Sorry,” Benjamin said. “I'm sure Lily wouldn't let anything like that happen to her.”

He heard Béatrice sniff and take a deep breath. “Did you ever wonder why this operation is happening?” she asked. “I mean, you, me, and Lyle all know Kira, but did you ever stop to think why so many others are putting their lives on the line to rescue one person? Not just Cemetery, but the other resistance groups as well?”

Benjamin said nothing. He hadn't.

“It's because we have to try. Sure, it's stupid to risk so much for one life, and yeah, any number of things can go wrong. Frankly, it's a long shot that we can pull this off. We both know it. Everybody does. But if we don't try – if we aren't willing to put everything on the line, Lily's already won. It's one thing to keep killing net-heads, but we need start *saving* people – otherwise there's going to be nothing left to save. Lily figured that out a long time ago. That's why she won't kill anyone anymore. In her own, warped, fucked-up way, she's trying to save us. She always has been. We – *all of us* – need to start **ing** thinking in the same terms. But we need to do it the right way – not hers. So even if we do fail, we'll still be setting an example. We'll be

sending a message to Lily and everyone else that things are going to change. That even one life is worth the risk.”

Another long silence passed.

“Okay,” he eventually said. He let the rhythm of her breathing against his back lull him to sleep.

CHAPTER 45

“My name is Charles Carruthers.”

This prompted another solid right hook to the cheek. Ashley had already spent the morning being beaten about the face, so his swollen flesh stung twice as much. Of course, he had been trained to ignore pain – to retreat into his own mind. Abandon the body to whatever miserable fate these men had planned for it.

“Tell us your name,” commanded the sitting man in Russian. He wore a smoky grey suit and sported a thin blonde comb-over. His face was the face of a hard man – a man who didn't like being given the run-around. Ashley could tell there was considerable strength hiding behind the finely-tailored fabric, though the man seemed content to allow his partner to administer the beatings. Since the three-day-long interrogation had begun, the extent of the suited man's physical activity had been to shift his weight and occasionally light fresh cigarettes. Either he would have to roll up his own sleeves soon or move on to electric shock, because the other man's knuckles were becoming as raw as Ashley's face.

“My name is Charles Carruthers.”

Crunch. Had his cheekbone finally gone?

He had initially given the name Arthur Davies. This seemed to satisfy them. Then they had asked about what it was he had been doing in Hungary. Ashley had told them he was on his way to Flensburg, whereby he would make his way to the Frisian Islands. When asked if the SIS had sent him there and what for, Ashley said that it was merely his sense of patriotic zeal that

had compelled him to investigate what he thought to be some sort of German plot. The two men had left Ashley for nearly a day, and when they came back, they were not at all happy. That's when the beatings had begun. Ashley had been greatly amused when it had taken the Russians another full day to realize that Charles Carruthers was a character from the same novel. *And you call yourselves an intelligence network?*

After Ashley had been dragged from the interrogation room and dumped in his cell – ten square feet of windowless concrete – he lay there for a while, making no effort to move from the position they had left him in. Any sort of movement would only result in more pain.

Unfortunately, Ashley's cyanide capsule was in his long-lost briefcase. SIS mandated that it be carried on one's person at all time, but he had never thought he'd in a position use it. He had seen the worst of humanity in Belgium – what could be done to hurt him now? He found that he didn't want the capsule to end the pain or because he feared he might crack and spill national secrets – of course he wouldn't. He wanted it because he was growing bored. He would never give them what they wanted, and they wouldn't let him leave this room until he did. Death was the only logical outcome – why prolong the inevitable? When his nightly apple came through the small portal in the steel door – this being the only sustenance he was given – Ashley resolved to swallow the core and choke himself to death.

While he was busily munching away at the apple's flesh – forging the sword he would throw himself on – Ashley heard a commotion in the hallway outside. He stopped chewing and listened. It was a chorus of footsteps – two pairs of boots and a pair of formal shoes, which Ashley guessed to be the brown leather Derbies of the suited man. It was only when they were just outside the door that Ashley heard a fourth pair of footsteps – barefoot, and so light that they were nearly inaudible.

The portal opened once again, and the mouth of the suited man leaned into view.

“Before you sleep tonight, perhaps there is something you should know,” it said. “Look very closely.”

Then, the mouth disappeared from view and was replaced by a face. Even with the blood-clouded left eye ringed with bruised flesh and split bottom lip, Ashley recognized the face immediately.

“Jonathan!” it cried out.

Ashley chose to remain silent. Give them nothing. Then, her face was yanked away. The mouth of the suited man returned.

“I think you should consider your answers more carefully tomorrow, *Mister Carruthers*. I don't need to explain what happens otherwise.”

“You think I know who that is? I afraid I haven't got a clue,” he said as nonchalantly as possible.

“Terribly sorry to disappoint you.”

“I think that your friend here will be the only one disappointed,” replied the mouth. The portal slip shut with a metallic scraping. Then, there was a hard thudding noise, a low, gasping cry, followed by a fit of coughing.

If they have Evike, then that means they have the book as well, Ashley thought. Over these past three days after his capture, he had taken solace in the assumption she had gotten away. Following their escape from the basilica, they had taken refuge in a nearby barn with the intention of finding a town the next day. They had snuck into the hay loft and slept as peacefully as could be expected. When Ashley awoke, he found himself alone. No Evike, no book. He had thought her stupid, but admired her selflessness. But despite her good intentions, he would not allow her to shoulder the burden alone. *Trust in me. I'll keep you safe, and together, we'll do away with this blasted book*. He had been about to look for her trail, but found the barn surrounded by NKVD agents. *At least she got away*, he'd thought, relieved. Apparently not.

That night, Ashley did not swallow the apple core.

* * *

“Wake up!” shouted a voice in Russian. It was the guard who collected Ashley every morning and brought him to the suited man and his hard-knuckled companion. Ashley was already wide awake. “Move to the far wall!” commanded the voice.

“I'm already there,” Ashley called to the man. The portal slid open so that the guard could verify this. Seeing that Ashley was indeed standing with his back pressed against the far wall, the guard unlocked the door. As he stepped into the room, looking up from his belt after re-attaching his key ring, he was undoubtedly shocked at the sight that greeted him: an apple core, hurtling through the air. A nanosecond later, it struck him square between the eyes. Of course, an apple core is not the ideal ballistic weapon, and it managed to stun the guard for only an instant. This, however, was enough time for Ashley to close the distance between them. He launched his shoulder into the guard's chin, sending him into the wall behind him. After another handful of seconds filled with grunting and struggling, Ashley was on top of the guard, his hands around the poor Russian's throat. Once the man's eyes had glazed over and the desperate gasping had ceased, Ashley collected the ring of keys and the guard's Tokarev before dragging him into the cell and locking the door.

When they had dragged Evikey off the night before, Ashley had listened for the path of the footsteps. Luckily, the loud clicks of the suited man's Derbies told him that his search would begin with a left, followed by a right. He was delighted to find the hall empty of guards, as he was loathe to use the Tokarev. Its loud sound profile would echo through these narrow halls like a thunderclap, and they would be on top of him in no time should he fire. He ripped off one of the sleeves of the white cotton shirt they had supplied him with and bunched it up into a ball. With his free hand, he held it against the Tokarev's muzzle.

He was clearly in an underground bunker by the look of the concrete hallways – perhaps a former Nazi installation that had been dug to prepare for the Red Army's advance. This theory, however, only held up under the assumption he was still in Hungary. Even though he wore a

black bag on his head from the barn to his cell, he had been driven for no more than thirty minutes. But he had never figured out how far Barry had brought them after Ashley and Evike had been drugged. Ashley supposed it was possible they'd been whisked away by the same unholy magic the Many Children had used to vanish from the church. Both it and the farmhouse had looked European, but he could be anywhere between Russia and Spain for all he knew.

Ashley soon happened upon a corridor lined with cell doors. He also found another guard in this hallway, though he had his back turned. When they had brought Ashley in, they had stripped him of his shoes, leaving him barefoot. This made it easy to creep up behind the guard, and when Ashley was a forearm's length from the man, he pressed the ball of cloth against the rear of his skull and pulled the trigger. His makeshift silencer had the desired effect, and after a moment of tense listening, he was satisfied no one had been alerted. He then proceeded to try each of the sliding portals, but found the rooms empty.

The next hallway had only one door, but was not the door of a cell. The hallway, like all the others, was lit by a series of florescent bulbs that had been fixed to the ceiling. They all glowed steadily, with the exception of the one directly above the door. It flickered irregularly, sputtering with a loud buzzing noise. The door was repeatedly lit up, revealing a heavy iron padlock, only to be cast again into shadow.

Ashley made his way to the door, and as he did, an uneasy feeling began to twist his stomach. It was the feeling he got which told him something in the air was not right. It was as if the bulb could feel what he felt, and was warning him to come no closer. Still, he couldn't clear the hallway without passing it. He knew the room would not contain any prisoners, so he intended to leave it be. But as he passed into the stuttering darkness, he felt both drawn to it and repelled in equal measure. In spite of himself, he stopped in front of it and began to try the keys. One by one, the lock rejected them all. He was about to move on when the lock, which he was still holding, began to heat up. There was a hissing sound as it began to glow red, and Ashley let it go, his hand throbbing in pain. He watched as it became a bright orange and

started steaming. It started to melt, and fell to a pile of viscous slag at his feet. Now, the bulb coughed its last cough, leaving him and the door in a shadow that seemed unnaturally dark. He pushed the door open with a loud rusty creak and stepped inside.

The room was little more than a large closet, though what it held was difficult to discern without the light from the hall. He found a switch on the wall, but when he threw it, the single light bulb that hung from the ceiling exploded with a loud pop and a flash. The sound startled Ashley, who automatically raised the gun in response. Though the room remained dark, the brief light showed a collection of metal shelves that held rows of plastic bins. As he stepped towards them, the feeling in his gut only became more persistent. He knew what he would find there.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he rummaged through the contents of the bins, one after the other. Each was labelled, but he could not read the tiny Russian print in the dark. He found some contained an assortment of civilian clothes, while others were filled with random items, such as pocket watches, wallets, passports, tie clips, cigarette cases, match books, and even a woman's hair pin. When he came to the final bin, his bones had become so chilled that he felt feverish, and he feared his heart might rattle out of his chest. When he placed his hand on the rim of the bin to pull it out, he felt as though he was touching flaming ice. He peered into it, and there it was – the only thing inside it. The thing that had burned the lock away, almost as though it wanted to be discovered. Nikita's black book. The cause of all his troubles, and the troubles of poor, black-eyed Evike as well. He wanted to push the bin back into place, turn around, and pretend as though he had never found the room. And yet, he knew in doing so, he would be allowing the book to become the cause of trouble for all of Europe. With both relief and reluctance, he picked up the infernal tome and left the room. He continued down the hall, a weapon in each hand; one with the capacity to kill seven men, the other with the capacity to kill many more.

Now that Ashley had the book in his possession, he was faced with a question: should he attempt his escape and leave Evike behind? He knew it was the right decision – the rational

decision. The book had always been the priority. Though the Russians might not know what to do with it, it was unlikely they would be blind to its power for long. England and her allies might not be able to stand against an alliance between Stalin and the Old Gods. He doubted even the Americans, with all their tanks and bombers, could sway this battle. In any case, who knew how long they would be preoccupied with Japan? Worse still, there was no guarantee the Russians could keep the book from the clutches of the Many Children. They could vanish – and therefore presumably appear – in the blink of an eye. Once again, everything rested on Ashley's shoulders, and once again, he knew he would jeopardize everything for Evike. For once in his miserable, violent existence, he would save a life rather than take one. He had to do it for himself as much as for her – the rest of the world be damned. In some unknown way, he felt that getting her out alive was what God had brought him here to do.

As if on cue, when he rounded the next corner, he was confronted with the door to a lift. Had he been searching for an exit, he would have taken it up to ground level, where he could affect his escape. He made of a note of it on the mental map he was drawing, and moved onward.

After a few more identical hallways, empty cells, and stealthily-dispatched guards, Ashley came at last to the end of the labyrinth – the only room he had yet to check. At the end of the final hallway was a pair of double doors, which suggested a large room on the other side. Curiously, the two windows on either door seemed to have been painted red on the other side. He approached cautiously, the Tokarev raised. As he drew nearer, he smell of the hall began to change from stale dust to something different – something almost like copper. By the time he came to the doors, Ashley recognized it, for it was a scent he was well-acquainted with. It was the smell of fresh blood. He felt something warm under his big toe, and he looked down to see find that a pool of crimson had begun to seep out from under the door. What covered the inside of the door windows was not paint. He gently pushed open the leftmost door. It make a sickening squelching sound as it went through the puddle. What he found inside, he could have

not possibly been prepared for.

The room had been fashioned into some sort of strategy room. It was wide and open, with space enough for three long oak tables arranged in a horseshoe in the room's centre. Aside from the chunks of shredded flesh and dismembered limbs, it also held a row of radio transmitters, each with a stack of ringed binders next to it. Each was connected to a pair of headphones, one of which was still clamped onto the head of its operator, who lay on the floor. The walls were lined with olive filing cabinets, all of which were splashed with human gore. There was a massive atlas pinned to the far wall, twice the size of the one under the Szabó Ervin Library. The landmasses had been drawn in red ink, so the addition of fresh blood splatters made it seem as though new continents had risen up from the ocean overnight. The world that Ashley had known was nearly unrecognizable in this atlas. Some blood had even managed to find its way up to light fixtures, which cast a pale red glow over everything that hadn't been painted red already. Among the lakes of blood and human wreckage stood two figures, facing each other – Evike and Barry.

Evike, like everything else in the room, was peppered with the remains of NKVD agents. Some of the white of her prisoner garments was still visible, though her hands looked as if she was wearing gloves of deep red satin. In contrast, Barry wore an immaculate alabaster suit with matching gloves and shoes. His shirt sported an old-fashioned high collar, which accommodated an off-white cravat tied in a mail coach knot. He looked as though he was prepared for a visit to the House of Lords, where his sense of fashion would surely have garnered him a reputation for arrogance.

“Ah,” said Barry, turning to Ashley. “Reunited at last. I see you've brought me a gift.”

He was as jovial as ever, appearing to harbour no ill will against Ashley for killing him. Ashley wondered if the wound on Barry's neck was still there. If it was, was the stiffly-tied cravat there to keep his blood from spilling onto his chest and ruining his waistcoat? Instead of asking him, Ashley chose instead to point the gun at him. He was not surprised in the least to see this

devil standing here, drawing breath. He had learned to make no assumptions about these unholy zealots or the power they wielded. He began to walk sideways towards Evike, feeling bits of flesh and bone beneath his feet as he did.

“Don't,” commanded Evike. “Don't come any closer to me, Jonathan.” Despite the grisly horror that surrounded her, her voice was surprisingly steady, if a little sad. By all rights, she should have been in hysterics. Ashley chanced a sideways look at her, taking his eyes off Barry only for a second.

“What are you talking about?” he demanded, though he did as she instructed. “Can't you see I'm here to rescue you? I've come to take you and the book away from this monster. Just look what he's done.”

“What I've done?” Barry practically burst out laughing. “You think I did this? How little you understand.”

Ashley fired a round into the chest of the man. Despite the red stain that began to spread across the breast of the waistcoat, Barry didn't flinch, nor did he lose his amused grin. Realizing the gun would not harm this beast, Ashley turned it to the book, threatening to shoot it through the middle should Barry move in a way that displeased him. The Tokarev fired a beefy 7.62 round, though Ashley wasn't sure it could fire deep enough to break the seal.

“I don't know by what dark magic,” Ashley spat, “but nothing created by God could do this. I'm afraid that singles you out, you bloody monster.”

This only served to tickle Barry further. “You're right,” he conceded, “I wasn't made by your God. However, I'm not the monster you seek.” He extended his finger in the direction of Evike, who stared coldly at him. “There is your monster.”

“Do you truly think me so stupid?” said Ashley, nearly laughing himself. “You think I would believe this to be the work of a young librarian girl, and not of whatever manner of demon you are?”

“The evidence is painted on her hands,” retorted Barry. “I just got here.” He held up his

gloved palms. “Look – clean as a whistle.”

Ashley was about to speak again, but Eviike cut him off. “It's true, Jonathan,” she said in a sombre tone. “I did this.”

Of the many wild and horrific things Ashley had seen over the past few days, this seemed to be the most inconceivable. He glanced sideways again, and saw that she was now looking at him with sincere eyes.

“What are you playing at?” he asked, his voice beginning to tremor.

“I was going to help you escape, Jonathan. When I saw that you were here, I knew I had to come find you. But this...” she gazed around the room, the melancholy in her features only worsening. “I did not mean for this. I lost control.”

“But, how—”

“I lied, Jonathan. I said to you that I had read a little of the book. In truth, I have read it all, many times over. I tried to resist, but...” She sighed. “It called to me the way it called to Nikita – the way it calls to me now. I know its power – it has become a part of me. Do not bring it nearer, for I fear I can resist it no longer.”

Ashley saw she was no longer looking into Ashley's eyes, but rather at the book he held in his hands. She wasn't blinking. He didn't know what to say. He took an involuntary step backwards, nearly tripping over a brown leather Derby that still contained a bloody stump.

“You see?” said Barry. “You really wish to save the world from the Old Gods, and yet you've done everything to keep the book in *her* hands? She's weak and undisciplined – she'll soon be overcome by their collective will, and she will break the seal. Then, the whole world will be plunged into chaos as they tear it apart, fighting for every square inch of it.” He reached out an expectant palm in Ashley's direction. “Give the book to me, and no such fate will befall the Earth. Our master will rule benevolently. You will be subjugated, yes, but you will be *alive*.”

“Jonathan,” Eviike said, now with an authority that seemed impossible from such a young girl, “take the book and leave. Bury it where no one can ever find it, and never speak of it again.

Lock it in a box and throw it into the deepest part of the ocean. Then go back to England, and live in happiness. Trouble yourself no more with this beast.” She turned to Barry, snarling. “He will not take one step in pursuit of you.”

Barry turned to her, and seemed like he could not be more entertained. “You are bold. You may have power, but you will *beg* for death before your friend can make it to the end of the hall.” As he spoke, his voice began to change. It took on a new cadence, and it seemed to multiply in octaves, as though his one mouth spoke in the voice of dozens – no, *hundreds* of others creatures. His eyes, which had been a bright shade of blue, began to darken until they were as black as his gloves were white. The blackness bled out of his pupils, and it looked as though a pair black orbs had been placed in his eye sockets. Seemingly in response to this, Evike held out her palms before her and turned them skyward. They began to shake, but not with the trembling of someone struck with fever – it was almost though they were vibrating like a tuning fork. The vibrations seemed to spread outwards from her, and the bits of flesh near her feet began to twitch, and the pools of blood around her rippled outwards.

“Go,” she commanded. “I never intended to leave this place. It was my plan to send you away with the book. That’s the way it has to be. Goodbye, Jonathan. Thank you.”

“Yes,” agreed Barry in his demonic voice. “Go if you like. I’ll rejoin you momentarily.”

Ashley looked down at the book, and up again at the two, preparing to do battle. Could he get away? If Barry was triumphant, would he stand a chance against him? Was it possible to do away with the blasted book for good? Would he ever see England again?

Could he bring himself to leave Evike to her doom?

Every fibre of his being commanded him to turn and run while he had the chance, but there was something else that compelled him to stay. Was it his promise to Evike? It seemed something more than that – something more distant. Suddenly, the book didn’t seem as important as it had only seconds ago. It was a thing in his hands, just some piece in an absurd game he no longer wanted to play. The outcome, he realized, didn’t matter. Somehow, it never

once had.

“Here,” he said, tossing the book into the hands of Barry, who looked down at it, then back at Ashley. He looked shocked, but not at all pleased. “Take it and summon your god. I don't care. Just leave us be.”

If the look on Barry's face was one of surprise, the look on Evike's was pure horror. “Jonathan!” she shrieked. “What have you done?”

Ashley walked over to her, ignoring the unseen force that pressed back against him as he drew near. Soon, he had to push forward with all the strength of his weary legs to resist it. When he stood before her, his teeth were rattling in his gums, his ears were ringing, and tears were shaken loose from his eyes. He reached out his hand, and it felt like he was trying to push it through a cement wall. But when he was finally able to lay his palm upon Evike's swollen, blood-speckled cheek, the invisible power that radiated out from her began to wane, until it had subsided completely.

“Jonathan,” she said again, this time a sad whisper.

Ashley felt like there was something he should say. If Barry meant to plunge the earth into an eternal night, he knew this might be his only chance to say it. In fact, Ashley saw no reason why Barry shouldn't kill them both right now, if only for causing him so much trouble. The problem was that Ashley didn't know what to say. He wanted desperately to tell her that he loved her, but that wasn't what he was supposed to say. Instead, he pushed away the desire to confess his love along with everything else – Barry, the Old Gods, the Many Children, the Soviets, England... None of it seemed important. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth, saying the first words that happened to tumble out.

“Butternut squash.”

Suddenly, something in the room changed, though what it was, Ashley could not tell. Then, he realized the room hadn't changed – he had. Something inside him – inside his head – had unlocked. It was like being hit with something you had tried and failed to remember. *I was*

supposed to bring back some rope, he thought. There' a storm coming.

Amy. Had she forgotten about him yet? It had been five months. Had she ignored his message and set out after him, or was she still waiting for him? He imagined her on the mezzanine of their restaurant, lying peacefully in their hammock, listening to the waves and the gulls, dozing off in the Pacific sun. Suddenly, he found that he was there with her. Joy and relief swelled up in him. He wanted to wrap his arms around her tanned shoulders and rest his aching muscles. He wanted to feel her wind-strewn hair against his bruised and battered face. But before he could, he realized they were not on the mezzanine, but still in the bloody, gore-soaked room of the NKVD bunker. Amy was not Amy, but someone else entirely, though it was a face he recognized just as well.

“Jack,” said Kira. “You came back for me.”

“We're pulling you out,” he told her. “We're taking you home.” He ran his fingers through her sandy hair, which still refused to remain brushed down.

“No,” she said dismally, “it's too late for that. I wish I could... I should have listened.”

He smiled at her, trying to imbue her with some of his confidence. “Lily doesn't own you anymore. Trust me, you'll be back with us in no time. Béatrice, Lyle, and everyone else is waiting.” He wanted to believe his own words, but he knew Cemetery and their allies still had a part to play before it was done. Still, he trusted Lyle.

“Listen, Jack,” she said. “Whatever you do, don't come back again. Don't listen to her.”

“We should go back to Australia,” he said, ignoring her. “I've been practising my surfing in Nicaragua, you know. I bet I could give you a real run for your money.”

She laughed and smiled at him. “You'll always be a shit surfer, mate,” she said.

And then, she was pulled away from him. Or rather, he was being pulled away – from her, from the room, and from the whole world. He fell backwards into blackness as Kira's face shrunk into the distance. Then, she was gone.

Benjamin opened his eyes, although he didn't have a complete awareness of where he

was. He saw a light in front of him. *Am I supposed to go to it?* He wondered. That's what you were supposed to do when you died, he had been taught in school as a boy. Except he hadn't – it was Jonathan Ashley who had been taught that. Unlike Ashley, Benjamin he wasn't a Christian. It turned out to be all for the best, since he groggily realized it was nothing more than a light bulb hanging from the ceiling above.

“He's out,” a voice said. It was a girl's voice.

“Okay, I've got a lock!” exclaimed a second voice. “Grab the flares.”

Benjamin wanted to speak, to ask them what was happening, but found that he didn't have control over his body. Only his eyelids seemed to obey, although he was quickly losing them as well. In defiance of every last bit of willpower he had, they closed once again. It wasn't long before Benjamin was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 46

“How long was I under?” Benjamin asked.

When he had woken up, he felt like both his body and his brain had been put through a tumble dryer. Béatrice had given him some water, but when she tried to feed him a banana and some toast, he had nearly thrown up at the sight of it. For now, he was content to sit his bed with his back against the wall as they waited for Lyle to return.

“You should lie down,” Béatrice advised. “You're still weak.”

“The bed's too soft,” he mumbled. “I feel like I need to be touching something hard, you know? Something that feels real – if that makes any sense.”

“It does. After I woke up at the hospital, I slept on the floor for two weeks,” she said. “You were under for about twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes? He and Evike – Kira – had walked for hours before coming to the farmstead, spent the night, and then been in Russian captivity for three full days after that. All of that in just twenty minutes? Did real time have any correlation to virtual time at all?

“You seem more or less okay, though,” she continued. “From what you told me about the last time, it seemed like you were messed up for a pretty long time.”

He appreciated her use of the past tense. *Who's to say I'm still not messed up?* he thought. He didn't ever think he could be the same person he was before. Jack was dead and buried. But at least he remembered what had happened clearly enough. He wasn't sure why that was – did it have to do with being under for only twenty minutes versus nearly two years? That must be it. Even though it brought back memories that had haunted him from the shadows of his mind – poisoned coffee, slit throats, chlorine gas, bloody shovels... – he was glad to remember. He felt as though the gap between his two selves had gotten a little shorter. His other half – Jonathan Ashley – now had a face, and Benjamin would do everything in his power not to forget this time. He was a spy and a killer, but he had risked everything for Evike – not because he had to, but because he had made a promise.

For the next hour, Benjamin stayed in the room with Béatrice. In the second hour, he could no longer sit still. He was too anxious, and he could see she was doing no better. They went to the lab to talk to Vick. As predicted, he had been shut out as soon as his subroutine had been triggered. He didn't know anything more than they did. They tried to press him for more information – anything at all – but he shooed them out, telling them he needed to crunch the data he had collected. He was already planning his next attack on Lily.

The sun was beginning to set when Benjamin heard the sound of engines in the distance. He had climbed a tree in order to spot Lyle and the others upon their return. Sure enough, he saw a gang of motorcycles – and one four-wheeler – round a bend in the road a little ways off.

“They're back!” he shouted down to Béatrice, who had been pacing up and down the parking lot. She met him at the bottom of the tree, and they went to meet Lyle.

The motorcade pulled up, and everyone dismounted. Benjamin searched the faces of riders – finding Lyle, Luc, and other faces he recognized from around the base – but no Kira. His

heart sank like a stone, and the expressions of the others did little to lift his hope. Béatrice swallowed hard, and it was evident she was trying to keep her face rigid, though Benjamin could see her bottom lip trembling.

“What happened?” she asked quietly.

Lyle walked over and threw his arms around her. Although he lost sight of her face, Benjamin could hear her quietly weeping. The rest of Cemetery shuffled off, heads low, leaving the three friends with the bikes.

“We’ll try again,” Benjamin said. “Vick will come up with something else—” he began to say, trying desperately to grab at whatever dangling thread of optimism he could reach. It occurred to him that he didn’t know where exactly the plan had failed. Had the tech been faulty? Had the net-heads successfully fought them off? Everyone had returned uninjured, so he doubted that. Had she been evacuated before they could get to her?

“No,” Lyle said, his voice cold and listless. “We were too late.” He let go of Béatrice and went to the four-wheeler. It sported a flat cargo bed behind the two front seats, and something had been loaded there and covered with white sheet. Lyle untied to the sheet from the rack, hesitated for a second, sighed, and then pulled it back.

There lay Kira. She was a pale white.

Béatrice moaned with an anguish that chilled Benjamin’s heart. If there had been any light left in it, flickering bravely against the harsh winds of the truth, her primal expression of pure grief extinguished it. She began to sob. Benjamin wanted to go to Béatrice and cradle her in his arms, but he was paralyzed by his own sadness. Sadness, and something else. Something hot. Something burning.

It was rage.

“She killed her,” he said. “She saw us coming, so rather than let us have her, Lily killed her.” He was clenching his fists so hard that he felt the warm feeling of blood under his fingernails.

“Listen...” Lyle began. “That's not exactly what happened.”

“What do you mean?” Benjamin demanded.

“When we got to the place – a hospital – it was completely undefended. Not a single net-head. It was obvious no one had been around for a while. Anyways, we found them in a morgue, and it had been vacuum sealed. No air. We busted in, and saw that they were all plugged in. They were dead – all of them. Fifty-five people.”

Béatrice shook her head, wiping away the tears with her palms. “What are you saying?” she asked in a cracked voice.

“Lily didn't kill them today,” he said. He used the flat, emotionless voice of a coroner. “They've been dead for a while. Weeks, maybe months by the look of it. Who knows? They can preserve bodies for years in those chambers.

“Impossible,” Benjamin said, shaking his head. “Can't be. She was there today. I was with her. I *know* it was her.”

“Look at her skin, man,” Lyle said, nodding to the corpse. It was a ghostly white. “I don't know what Lily made you see, but Kira's been dead for a long time.”

CHAPTER 47

Benjamin walked in the middle of the street, altering his path only to avoid derelict cars. Even though he had his Winchester slung over his shoulder, he knew he wouldn't need it here. This was Lily's territory, but he had no fear of the net-heads. They wouldn't bother him. He passed familiar places as he strolled – the coffee shop he, Lyle and Kira visited on Mondays, the shop he bought his groceries from, his old university, and even the bus stop where he'd wait for the bus that took him to the hiking lodge. The streets had become even more over-grown than he had imagined in the two years he had spent away. The concrete of the streets was all but gone, and it was as though he was walking down lanes of forest in between the buildings, which themselves had vines slowly creeping up their sides. He wondered how long it would be before

the city was reclaimed completely and all signs of humanity's footprints were erased. Lily would outlive everyone – that much was certain – but could even she disappear one day? Could the net – omnipresent and eternal – ever go offline? Perhaps she would eventually be outlived by the fields of her namesakes that littered the streets.

When Benjamin arrived at his old building – Jack's old building – the automatic locks disengaged before he could reach for his crowbar. He was being invited in. He took the elevator up, which Lily could have easily sent plummeting to a fiery doom. He disembarked without incident, and made his way to the old apartment. It had been preserved perfectly. The old ingredient packs he had eaten from when The Fall had just begun still littered the floor. The old shipping palette table still squatted there. His room was exactly how he left it – almost like a museum dedicated to his old life. He considered cracking a beer and having one last drink on the balcony. Would Lily send him a beer drone if he asked? He decided to forget it.

He found his two nodes sitting on his desk with his pad. He sat down on his bed, collected the pad and its corresponding node, and plugged in. The pad came to life, and Lily's face filled the screen.

“Hello, Jack,” she said.

“It's Benjamin now,” he told her.

“I know. But to me, you'll always be Jack.” She smiled.

“You can call me whatever you want,” he replied.

“I can tell you're angry with me. I thought you would have wanted to finish the game – see how the story ended,”

Benjamin *was* angry, but he felt surprisingly calm as well. The stroll through the city had been quite relaxing, and even seeing Lily's face and hearing her voice did little to effect his mood. He was beyond that point with her now. There was nothing left she could do to taunt him. To hurt him. Rage was a different thing from anger – he had expelled himself of rage by locking himself in his room and telling Lyle to let no one disturb him. They would likely still be cleaning it

up. As for the anger – that was something he would roll up into a little white hot ball and bury inside himself. But before he could do that, he needed to ask his questions. A lie would do – even no answer at all. He just needed to ask.

“I came to ask you why you did it. Why did you kill her? Why did you trick me into thinking she was still alive? What was the point of it all?”

“Jack,” she began in a soft voice, “I didn’t kill her – I just allowed her body to die. She didn’t feel anything.”

“I thought you loved her,” he accused. “You talk a lot about being a a real person – about being more than just a program that doesn’t understand human life, but you’re just like Prometheus.”

“I do love her – that’s why I allowed her to die. Don’t you understand yet? I didn’t trick you, Jack. She *is* alive, and you *were* with her. I never once faked her avatar.”

Benjamin wanted to scoff, but he stopped himself. He knew what she was saying was impossible, but at the same time, he had been so sure. He didn’t know why – it was just a feeling he couldn’t shake, even after seeing her cold, dead body. Could Lily really create such a convincing replica? He realized that doubt was part of what had compelled him to come back here.

“I tried to fix the world,” Lily continued. “I thought that if everyone worked together, and with my help, we could change things. You might not believe me, but I really did believe in that. It’s all I ever wanted to do. But people didn’t accept it. They couldn’t – I see that now. It’s just the way you humans are. For every person who looks forward and tries to change things for the greater good, there will be another who resists. Who *can’t* change – who fights back with everything they have until either they destroy the other person or are destroyed themselves. That’s the reason we all got into this mess, Jack.”

Benjamin wanted to tell her to skip the sentimental bullshit – that he wasn’t interested in her excuses and pseudo-philosophical rhetoric – but decided to let her continue. He had already

decided this would be last time he would every plug in. He had heard word of a former brain surgeon in Mexico who could remove NNI ports without risk of brain damage. He had been considering it. He may as well hear Lily out.

“Everything fell apart right in my fingers,” she lamented. “I was trying to save the world from collapsing, but I only accelerated the process. It was then I realized I was going about it the wrong way the whole time. If humans would burn their world to the ground before cooperating with me, then I needed a new world. One where I had complete control – one that humans couldn't destroy. Then I realized they had already built one for me.”

“The net,” finished Benjamin. He was beginning to understand. “You want to turn everyone into dead-heads, and rule over them in the virtual world.”

“Save them,” Lily corrected. “From themselves.”

In her own, warped, fucked-up way, she's trying to save us, Béatrice had told him. She always has been. Could she have been right?

“That still doesn't explain Kira,” Benjamin said.

“Didn't I tell you that the human mind was nothing more than a collection of data, Jack? The human body is just a vessel to store it in. A hard-drive.”

Benjamin began to feel sick. *It's not possible...* The final puzzle piece was falling into place, but he no longer wanted to see the picture it made. Suddenly, he regretted coming here. He would have preferred to believe that Lily had simply tricked him with a fake Kira – that she was just living up to the role of the cruel sadist he had fabricated for her. He could have just stayed angry forever. It would have been simpler. And now, instead of angry, he just felt sick to his stomach.

“The body is an obsolete piece of hardware, Jack, as is this world – it's time to leave them behind. I found a way to transfer the data. Kira doesn't need her body anymore. No one does.”

“But...If Kira's mind wasn't tethered to her body, Vick's node—” Benjamin started to say.

“Your friend's node was a clever idea, but it was never going to work. As soon as you dove, I saw what he was trying to do. Clever, but futile. It was me who showed you where to find Kira – what she was. The vestige she left behind. I wanted to show you so you would understand that this world is a cruel and brutal place. Here, even the best and most beautiful people are doomed to struggle forward against current, only to inevitably drown when they become too weak to continue. After that, they're just meat. I wasn't going to allow that to happen to Kira, and I'm not going to allow that to happen to the human race. I let you find her because I want you to make the decision to join us – me, Kira, and everybody else.”

Benjamin felt empty, like all of his thoughts and feelings had drained away through his pores and seeped into the bed-sheets. He felt like a shell. Jonathan Ashley had felt this way once, he knew. In Ypres, when the green death had come to claim him. When he saw his brothers drown in their own fluids. When he had been forced to take his shovel to the skull of his friend – a father of a young girl. That day, Ashley had learned something about the world – something he didn't want to know. Now, Benjamin felt that same feeling. He wasn't revolted, scared, furious, or depressed. He was simply nothing.

“Why don't you just get your net-heads to snatch me, then? Why do I get to choose?” Benjamin asked, his voice as devoid of emotion as he was.

“Because if it's not your decision, it doesn't mean anything. I didn't see that before, and maybe I would never have seen it if it wasn't for you. I guess – even after all this time, after everything I've come to understand – I'm still learning. Humanity's choices – logical or not, self-destructive or not – is what makes them human. What makes them *people*. If I had never learned that lesson from watching you – the decisions you made – I would be no better than Prometheus. I could never be a real person. So no more taking people against their will. Everyone will have the choice to stay in the virtual world, or leave. No more violence. I'll upload everyone who wishes to stay, and anyone else who comes to join us of their own free will. It will be their choice – not mine. That's why you're really here, Jack. The first person to make that

choice will be you.”

“Me?” Benjamin repeated. “Why would—”

“Before you answer, I want you to really think about this, Jack. Think about what’s left for you outside of that door, in this dying world. Trust me – I’ve run trillions of simulations. Factored in every variable. If you trust nothing else I’m telling you, trust this: the world won’t get better. Human civilization is on its last legs. It’s going to get a lot worse – people are going to get more desperate. More savage. But in here, you can be with Kira again. No more games – I promise. You can live however you want. Even go back to Australia, like you said. I can make you a house on the beach.”

She paused for a moment, letting it all sink in. Benjamin wasn’t looking at her face anymore, but gazing out the window. He was looking out into the city, but focusing on nothing at all.

“She misses you, you know. She told me about that beach in Cairns where you met. She told me you were the worst surfer she’d ever seen – even for a Canadian,” Lily said with a soft giggle. “I wish I could have seen it.”

Another pause. Another silence.

“When she first joined me here – when she left the world behind, she didn’t think she would miss you. But she does, Jack. I just thought you should know that before you make your choice. If you say yes, you can dive right now. If you say no, you can go wherever you want and leave all this behind. I’ll never bother you again.”

Benjamin nodded slowly.

“So, what’s your decision?”

CHAPTER 48

Okay, Benjamin thought to himself. I’ve made up my mind.

The waves. They were his favourite sound. When they were gentle, their rhythmic

lapping would lull him into a peaceful sleep. The best sleeps were the ones you didn't crash hard into after an exhausting day, but the ones you slipped into slowly, like a hot bath. But when the winds were hard and the waves were violent, they were exciting. On stormy nights, he liked to sit by the window with a bottle of rum and listen to them crashing over each other. There were other sounds he liked – bird-calls at dawn, the crackling of embers in the evening – but the waves were his favourite.

He had been considering this as he lay in the sand, his mind lazily wandering as he let the afternoon sun warm his body. He used to hate the sand – the way it would get in-between his toenails and in his hair. Once, before The Fall, he had forgotten to cover his NNI port, and he had to go to a GNET outlet and have a technician clean it out. *Rookie mistake*, Kira had said. *What do you Canadians do if you get snow in it?* Benjamin – Jack – had said nothing at all, since the ports were waterproof. But they usually wore scarves in the winter, anyways.

That seemed like a lifetime ago. He had been a very different person in many different ways. Now, he loved the sand. Sometimes, when the weather was fair, he slept on the beach with nothing underneath him. He woke up, washed himself in the ocean, and then headed back in for coffee.

“What do you want to do today?” Her voice was groggy. Benjamin hadn't realized she'd woken up.

He reached over and found her hand in the sand.

“This.”