To the family who steered me,

& to the brother who helped channel my

potential into writing,

thank you.

**Table of Contents**

Chapter 1...

Chapter 2..

Chapter 3...

Chapter 4...

Chapter 5...

Chapter 6...

Chapter 7...

Chapter 8...

Chapter 9...

Chapter 10...

Chapter 11...

Chapter 12...

Chapter 13...

Chapter 14...

Chapter 15...

Chapter 16...

Chapter 17...

Chapter 18...

Chapter 19...

Chapter 20...

Chapter 21...

Chapter 22...

Chapter 23...

Chapter 24...

The End...

Iam

Lou McGhee

Part One

# Chapter 1

It was a foggy morning in late August, the perfect weather to match the way I felt after an hour of vomiting. I was already running late for work, and it seemed like the morning was determined to make me even more so. To make matters worse, my two-year-old Alaskan Malamute, Jax, had managed to get his paws on my apartment keys, adding an additional twenty-two minutes to my delay. After a frantic search, I eventually found the keys buried in the soil of one of the planters in my apartment. I frowned at the plant I’d been neglecting holding on for dear life. I had been meaning to water it for a couple of weeks but now was not the time.

As I turned to leave, the mirror next to the sofa caught my attention and I realized my Michael Kors dress was tighter than usual, but I had no more time to tarry. I ran out of the door, forgetting to feed Jax, so I ran back inside to do so.

I would usually take the subway to work, but since I was over half an hour late, I decided to drive and park four blocks away from my building. My feet were already giving out in the high heels I wore, so I hopped on a bus down Congress Ave to spare myself further discomfort.

I crept into my small cubicle undetected, a total of 57 minutes late. No one seemed to notice as I sunk into my office chair with a sigh, so frustrated with the morning thus far.

My desk phone was already ringing off the hook, but I needed a few more minutes to mentally prepare for the day. I ignored the calls. I didn’t know why I was feeling the way that I was, but my head felt like it was spinning. I rested my head on my hand, hoping I would not puke again. I took a look at my graduate diploma sitting on my desk to the left of the virtual computer screen; Pennsylvania State University, MA in Journalism, Alissa Patel.

To the right of my diploma was a picture of my prolific father, Amir Patel, the prevailing reason I got my current job in Downtown Chicago, far from my home in Pennsylvania. In many ways, I felt I was living in my father’s shadow. He was also a journalist, and my successes seemed to always rest under the umbrella of his accomplishments.

My father was crowned Chief Producer at the New York Times, and it earned me respect and security my whole life. Even with my position, I’d like to believe I’d gotten here by my own merit, but in actuality, my father made a call to someone who made a call, and boom, there I was, the new Junior Journalist at the Chicago Sunrise. I was grateful but also, competitive. I was determined to make a name for myself.

My desk was cluttered with files of my most recent publications which busted city officials involved with a resurrected Chicago Mafia. My name began to ring as much as my phone in the office, and it made me feel I was heading in the right direction. Or so I thought.

I used the mirror feature on my smart desktop computer screen to see if I looked as stressed as I felt, and it was the same. The color in my face was flushed and I was more pale than usual. A few strands of hair were out of place on my head and my pink bra was showing above my dress. In the middle of adjusting myself, I was disrupted by a familiar pungent odor; it was the perfume of my voluptuous boss, Linda Stewart, arriving just in time to greet me.

“Well, look who decided to grace us with her presence this grand Friday morning.” I turned the mirror screen off and spun around to her disapproving look at my cleavage. I could see the jealousy in her eyes which I usually took as a compliment but at that moment, I was nervous.

“Good morning, Linda. I hope your morning has been better than mine so far. Did you get any of my messages?” I forced a warm smile.

She unfolded her arms, “I’ve been too busy to check messages.” Her hands landed on her hips, “I hope your tardiness is a result of a busy night for you working on the story you owe me?”

I was taken aback, “I turned in my latest article on Tuesday. I’m good for at least another week, or two.”

“You seem to have forgotten about the article you promised to deliver me like, yesterday. Hello, is anybody home? You know, about the upcoming anniversary of Red Flag Day, only the most famous event in modern-day history.” Her patience was running thin.

I stalled, “Linda, I’m only pulling your leg, how could I forget? That’s what my messages were about, I was informing you I will need a little extension with the article.”

“Why?” She demanded.

Since I was brought in at the last minute to fill the position left vacant by a senior writer, I had actually forgotten about the assignment. I accepted eagerly but the fatigue and weakness began around the same time and had been distracting my performance. However, the truth was not the way to go, “Well, between you and me, I have a provocative testimony from an, how can I say, important person involved in the war.” I said, making it up as I went.

“Hm, well you have my curiosity. Should I keep drilling you with questions, or when are you going to let me in on this lead?” She asked.

“I rather surprise you, if that’s okay with you.” I gave a kiddish smile but it did amuse her.

“You have until midnight, not a millisecond later,” She declared.

“Midnight?” I exclaimed, but I caught myself as she shifted her hands from her hips. “It’ll be worth the wait, Linda.” I smiled.

She departed, leaving behind traces of her stinky perfume. I used the Lysol disinfecting spray resting at the foot of my desk to restore the air after her disturbance. Usually, I was able to hear Linda stomping around in her heels which are usually too big for her feet but she caught me off-guard that day. To make matters worse, I was ill-prepared for the deadline with no actual lead. I had to think of something because I wanted to expand my journalism success.

I looked back at the photograph of my father, who garnered most of his success from being an on-ground photographer in the Nuclear War that ended twenty-five years ago. I thought that maybe I could call him and he’d bail me out of the sticky situation I found myself in. He could be the important person I was referring to, but Linda knew of my father and it was the reason she envied me; my dad played golf with her boss. It made her intimidated that maybe I would take her position.

My father’s popularity and fortune stemmed from the horrid happenings of the Nuclear War. He was only 22 years old when the War began, and no military would accept him as a soldier because of his history of asthma. He felt the need to protect his country and his family when his brother, a year his junior, was enlisted and killed in the War. My father picked up his camera and went to work on foot. It was epic and ugly, but he captured much of the despair and became a published photographer. He lived to not only tell his story but also those of the many soldiers and people he may have never met because of the war. He even met my mother working at a coffee shop abroad. Before his publications, my family lived predominantly in poverty and my father had no idea that his efforts would change that.

The Nuclear War began in May of 2042 when the U.S. suffered a blindsided attack in the bay of San Francisco, California recording 623 American lives. Foreign intelligence broke through American cyber defenses and allowed the anonymous blow to ensue. Suspicion pointed to North Korea’s latest advancement in the nuclear division at the time. Fifty-five hours later, Russia began its invasion of Alaska, and the United States declared war; we retaliated but were initially overpowered once North Korea joined in along with China on enemy lines. It would be the first foreign invasion in American history. Defenses were held as the enemies reached south as far as California. The United Kingdom, France, and Israel were also subject to enemy missiles and were almost ransacked during invasions leading neighboring countries to choose sides. The United Nations was challenged decisively, but the U.S. had developed its own technological weapon to employ against the Nuclear Communists resulting in a unanimous surrender by first China in September of 2045. The day was called Red Flag Day when the President of China was the first to sign the Treaty agreeing to terms on its crimes against global peace. Their allies would follow.

That was the extent of my knowledge of the Nuclear War; too small of intelligence to have the honor of writing an article independently. Besides, I was a journalist who liked to write through the eyes of firsthand accounts. Last resort, I would call my father to bail me out, since I was reminded that he wasn’t the only supportive male in my life…

“Good morning, my love.” I spun around in my office chair, this time to my self-proclaimed ‘knight’ in shining armor, Alan Macintosh. He smiled at me, ignoring my distraught appearance. He was carrying half a dozen donuts in a box and two cups of hot coffee from a cafe two blocks away. Although he was my first friend since I moved here, I did not my best not to get too comfortable with him. Still, he would find opportunities to get closer, “I heard you were having a bad day.” He said as he made himself at home in my cubicle and pulled up a chair close to me. He placed the coffee and donuts in a clear space on the desk.

“Oh, Alan… how can you bring me donuts in the condition I’m in?” I shied away from his green eyes which reminded me of the serene pond in my childhood backyard.

“What condition are you in that a donut can’t fix?” Alan responded as he picked out one of the glazed ones and plopped his feet up on my desk. “Talk to me.”

I rolled my eyes, “I need to find a story like yesterday!”

“About Red Flag Day?” He chewed loudly on his donut, and I took a sip of the coffee he handed to me. “I can help you with that.”

I sat the coffee down. “I’m not really asking for your help, Alan. It’s just that Linda caught me empty-handed today because I’ve been so distracted lately.” I questioned why I was opening up to him as I caught myself almost drowning in his green eyes again. “Besides, your help always comes with strings attached.”

“Will you relax?” He finished his donut and removed his feet from the desk. “At some point, my services will be recognized by you, and you’re going to be glad I’m persistent.” He said as humbly as possible. “I’ll make a call, and I’ll reach out when I get word.” He scurried out of my cubicle, taking with him one more donut and a coffee, leaving the rest for me.

I grabbed a donut and ate it slowly, hoping not to trigger any more vomiting. I couldn’t help but feel annoyed. I hated that deep down inside I thought that Alan was indeed attractive; his brown scruffy hair, his being at the age where he can fashionably wear a five o’clock shadow, the way his biceps bulged through his tight shirts, and him being the reliable human he was, were all reasons why I felt the need to keep space between us. I couldn’t afford to be distracted by the staff photographer, no matter how lonely I felt in the new big city. I was a determined young woman, and I refused to get caught up and put off track by yet another boy despite how nice he was. I felt he could take me off course if I allowed him to. It happened to me with an ex-boyfriend before.

I had to focus on my career, but every now and then, my mind would drift back to weeks’ prior on a Friday night that Alan and I shared at our company party. After a few glasses of wine and a little soft music, Alan swept me off of my feet. One thing led to another, and I woke up in the middle of the night to sneak out of his bachelor pad. I vowed never to slip up like that again. I was disappointed in myself after the fact; but part of me wanted more, and I could see that he did too.

He contacted me after lunch, saying he had a story for me, and I was to meet with his father, Roy Macintosh, a captain in the Nuclear War. He is believed to have witnessed a unique occurrence while stationed in Alaska. After work, I took the subway a few stops to Grant Park. The sun still hadn’t come out behind the clouds, and yet the air was fresh from the past few days of rain. The children in the park were playing nicely and loudly.

Mr. Macintosh was late, of course, and after watching children run back and forth for twenty-something minutes, my patience was running a little thin. I called Alan to complain, but he told me what he always tells me, “Relax baby,” I felt patronized and so I hung up the phone.

It was then 5:22 pm, I had waited fifteen more minutes, and I stood up to leave. As I did, I skipped a breath at the sight of a man standing near the park’s entrance. He wasn’t doing anything significant, but he was captivating to me, and I didn’t understand why. He spoke to an elderly lady whose eyes were as gray as the clouds in the sky above, and I could tell that she was blind. I tried to stop myself from staring further at them, but I had difficulty. What is going on with me? I thought.

My phone rang from a number I didn’t recognize, finally taking my attention away from the two mysterious figures, “Hello, I’m calling for Alissa Patel,” a grave masculine voice spoke through the earpods I wore.

I did my best to conceal the impatience I felt, “Yes, hi, is this Mr. Macintosh?”

“Call me Roy.” He insisted.

“Your son gave me the impression I would be meeting you in Grant Park. Do you have any news for me, Mister Roy?”

He cleared his throat, “You’re going to have to forgive me for delaying our meeting. I’m a pilot instructor these days and I got held up in the sky.”

“Oh no, is everything okay?”

“Fortunately, yes, one of my students missed a crucial step in a procedure and had to emergency land before anything else went wrong. It was a process, so I’m just now getting into my car to go home.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re well. I can imagine it might have given you a shake.”

“That’s sweet of you, young lady, thank you. Listen, come and have dinner with us tonight. My wife is a master cook and she loves guests. Then I will be able to go more in-depth about the story Alan suggested you’d be interested in.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Mr. Macintosh-”

“Roy-”

“Roy, unfortunately, I don’t have the time to fraternize since my deadline for the story was hours ago. I know you understand.” I objected.

This seemed to only make him more persistent. “I do, however, I insist.” And that was final. “Let’s say 7:30 pm, okay? See you then.” And he ended the call before I was able to confirm.

I called Alan again; the second call, my annoyance level doubled, “What is your father up to? He says I have to come to dinner to get the story.”

“Well, you do have to eat, right?” Alan replied.

“Yes, but I’m in the middle of a crisis! Nor do I trust your intentions.”

This time he hung up on me. I put a hand over my mouth to keep myself from hurling again. I wanted to scream and I couldn’t help but feel stressed. I hated being behind with work. Going to dinner for a story was cutting too close for comfort, and it meant another sleepless night. I really needed to rest because I didn’t have much bodily strength after my morning violently discharging my insides. I was running on adrenaline and also the dinner seemed more like a date than a story.

I took three deep breaths in order to gather myself and leave. I figured I’d get ready for dinner since it seemed to be an offer I couldn’t refuse. I turned to leave, but then I noticed the tall, dark, and mysterious man watching me, noticing me. He had the brownest eyes I had ever seen that looked through my soul in a somehow noninvasive manner. I was drawn to him, enchanted almost, and I had to bring myself out of his captivity once more. He smiled at me, and I smiled back.

After what seemed like a lot of effort, I left the park. I turned back one last time to see if the mysterious man would be looking at me still, but he was gone. The elderly blind woman remained in the park with the children playing all around. She sat alone on the bench, and it was as if the mysterious man was never there. I turned to leave again, and just as I did, the blind woman waved to me. Or so I thought - I mean, she was blind, but her hand was in the air, and there was a serene smile on her face in my direction. I hoped it was for me.

# Chapter 2

5:49 pm, I exited the train station and walked a couple of blocks to where my car was parked. I was sensitive to everything and everyone around me, and I knew it had to do with my body.

I thought I was in a rush but I was distracted again and this time by the thought of the mysterious man and the elderly blind woman in Grant Park. I wondered who they could be. I felt attracted to the man, an attraction that surpassed his handsome features. His essence seemed to wield a kind of esoteric knowledge that I was curious about.

I got in and started my electric 2060 Ford Focus, it was 5:55 pm. I exited the parking garage and drove onto a ramp to Lake Shore Drive north. I watched the sun finally break through the clouds and everything was beautiful for the first time that day. I felt a peace I hoped would last. I was optimistic that it would, and it brought me back to the daze I experienced inside the mysterious man’s brown eyes. In that split second, my life changed. Just like earlier with my boss Linda, Alan, and the mysterious persons at Grant Park, I was once again caught off guard…

I didn’t see the blue Caravan on the ramp in front of me on the wrong side of the partition, with no intention of stopping. There was a woman driving the van and in the back seat were two car seats that were fortunately empty. The look of panic on the mother’s face snapped me back to the present, and I swerved my car to avoid her, as she swerved the other way. The airbags erupted as I collided with the wall of the highway entrance. The blue caravan crashed into the opposite side and had flipped over completely.

Everything went silent, and I was disoriented as I lifted my head from the dash. I heard voices screaming and cars coming to halts. I lifted my head to feel the effects of gravity a little heavier than before; I didn’t know if I was right-side up or hanging behind the wheel by my seat belt. I began feeling a rising presence of warmth. More than the physical warmth of the fire spreading around the hood of my car. No, it was a warmth I didn’t know existed.

I heard, in what seemed like the far distance, my door being pried open. I turned to see what was going on, and I saw no other than the mysterious man from earlier at Grant Park reaching for me in my seat. He managed to get the seat belt off and I struggled to keep my head high. My body was in shock and I could barely move or feel anything save for the tears pouring down my face. The mysterious man held me in his arms, pulling me out from my Ford turned over on its side and ablaze in flames. My vision was fading as he carried me away.

I gathered enough strength to see the blue caravan and the mother who had been driving it. Her car, too, caught on fire. At that moment, my hearing returned to its full capacity and I heard the most horrid sound I wish I could forget; the mother trapped in her van was screaming in agony. I saw no one helping her but the mysterious man was carrying me away from the danger.

“Save her,” I croaked. But my voice was barely audible and my words did not reach him. “Save her!” I tried anyway. I gathered as much strength as possible to swarm out of the mysterious man’s arms but to no avail since he was much stronger. He held me tight.

“Are you listening to me? Save her! She has a family, goddamn it, save her!” I was frustrated and furious, but then I felt something peculiar while enthralled in his arms. I felt something different; it was the reason that the mysterious man was so unique and attractive. I felt his heartbeat in a notably odd location. It was near my ear drum, and it gave me a new strength for him to hear me, “She has children,” I pleaded, and finally, he looked down at me. His eyes were like those of an ancient oak tree, radiating warmth and wisdom. For a moment, I forgot everything. I fell into silence, engulfed in his gaze as he picked up the pace and disregarded my orders to save the woman trapped in her van. For a moment, there was peace in the midst of chaos, and in the next, we felt the impact of an explosion behind us, sending us flying several yards ahead. I lost consciousness completely, still wrapped in the strong arms of the mysterious man.

# Chapter 3

I understood in some capacity who I was before I lost my memories; I was a soldier and Lieutenant Gonsalves was no stranger, nor did he seem to be an enemy. But the old man pointed a semi-auto shotgun at me twenty feet away. He seemed to know who I was, but other than the information I was briefed on, I did not recognize him. A man-made pond separated us as he stood on the porch of a one-story home. I kept my hand on my electric pistol in my concealed harness, but I had no means to use it.

“You are Lieutenant Governor Federico Gonsalves, precinct 331, correct?” It was a rhetorical question that did not seem to flatter him.

“What are you doing here?” He continued to point his weapon.

“I want to talk.” I reached into my breast pocket.

He cocked the shotgun, “Don’t move!” But it was too late, I retrieved the titanium government official badge from my pocket as he pulled the trigger.

I flew several yards backward. The badge luckily intercepted the bullet and instead left a stinging sensation over my chest. He moved closer over me, still pointing the shotgun.

“Stay on the ground.” He demanded, and pain pulsated through me like a surge of lightning in my heart. At the moment, I had no choice but to obey. I held my badge in the air for the old man to see. His eyes widened at the sight of the badge, of which the bullet didn’t leave a bruise.

“I think it’s best you let me inside to talk.” I said from the ground. He placed his shotgun to the side and turned, and walked along the bridge over the man-made pond into his home. As I rose so did the sensation over my chest. I had no medicine for the pain but I hoped to not have another episode…

His home was cold, almost empty, and vacant of a woman’s touch. There was not much livelihood, save for the three-legged dog who hobbled over the creaky wooden floors. There were no plants and few decorations that accented the isolated pieces of furniture in the spacious sitting room. The interior design was entirely old-fashioned; instead of digital photographs, the walls were garnished with physical portraits and frames of guns and military memorabilia.

Lieutenant Gonsalves made room for me on a worn sofa in the center of the room, “I am no longer for hire. I am retired, and I refuse to cooperate after you people took my daughter away,” he said and sat opposite me in a chair.

The pain in my chest was still prevalent, but I had no choice but to endure it because I was on a mission, “We agree to reunite you, but your cooperation is vital.”

He stared at me and didn’t let up, “If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought your father discovered the fountain of youth. You’re the spitting image of the man.” He grunted and studied me a little closer. Time hadn’t been too kind to him. A few wiry gray hair strands remained on his shiny scalp.

I leaned forward to him in my seat. “Lieutenant Gonsalves, you understand that I’m here to make a transaction.” He picked up an open beer on the coffee table residing between us. In a couple of gulps, he finished it and picked up an unopened one from a six-pack. “20 years ago, you succeeded in planting what Dr. O’Donnell refers to as phase one. You’ve been on leave of action since then, and now is the time to finish what you started.”

“I knew this day would come. Though I’ve had a change of course, I knew this day would come.” He opened the new beer without removing his eyes from mine, “What if I don’t comply?”

“How could you not? Do you think you can continue to live in hiding?” I challenged him.

“Where is my daughter?” He demanded.

“You will have no future contact with your daughter unless you cooperate.” The pain in my chest grew larger. It was sporadic, and I didn’t know the exact cause. Above all, I felt bad for having to behave this way, but something compelled me to play my position in the manner I’d been hired.

“It’s been two years, Iam, no one knew you to exist anymore.” Lieutenant Gonsalves said, drunkenly.

I stood from my seat, “Irrelevance. You’re summoned to action. You understand the consequences if you fail to perform. Do I have your acceptance?”

He hung his head and nodded yes, “Iam, there has to be another way.”

“If there were, I wouldn’t be standing here with you right now. If reuniting with your daughter isn’t motivation enough, then you’ll be considered futile.”

He rose from his seat now and I stared into his tired eyes engulfed by dark circles. “You have to stop him.”

Sweat formed at the top of his brow and I could feel the heat of his rage building inside the cold one-story home. The pain in my chest subsided at the moment and I turned away from him, “Once your task is complete, you will learn the whereabouts of your family.”

“He has a bad heart, you know,” Lieutenant Gonsalves said to my back, “My grandson… I didn’t get to meet him, but I’ve heard things. If he doesn’t get the help he needs then I will be helping to start this war in vain.”

I looked over my shoulder back at him. I wanted to tell him I understood. I wanted to stay and make him an ally but I felt confused, so I followed my orders. “Lieutenant Gonsalves, you’ve already helped start this war.”

“Iam!” I opened the door. “You can stop this.” I continued out of the door. I paced myself on the wooden bridge over the man-made pond from his house. “You have to stop the Scientist. We can’t afford another war!” He yelled as I got into the back seat of my total black electric Rogue SUV.

I spent the next few days recovering alone. I traveled by plane from Lieutenant Gonsalves’ hideaway residence off the southern tip of Greenland to a densely populated Canadian town in Ottawa. I rented a single mildly furnished apartment. I needed the isolation in order to take the time to think and heal. Though I had a high tolerance for pain, I was recovering from a pain from which I could not source. During my take on solitude, I recalled that I had no idea where I was prior to two years ago. I lived in South Asian mountains among monks and performed physical labor in order to eat and drink fresh water. I had no accounts of my childhood even. I needed to re-access my memories.

Pain shot through my body, and I did not have a remedy. It had been quite some time since I’d lived without the medicine to sustain my heart. The monks convinced me that I would have to learn to live without it, and so I did, suffering sporadically here and there. I wasn’t sure how much longer I needed to heal, but I focused on my mission at hand because I had detailed knowledge of placements of war. It meant the world was in trouble.

I spent copious amounts of time lying on a firm mattress on the floor. I drank only water, ate only fish and bread, and sunbathed for a couple of hours a day. I would do countless push-ups and pull-ups inside the apartment for hours without stopping, despite the pain it caused. I was healing, and I felt my senses heightened; I could hear the faucet dripping in the restroom of my neighbor’s apartment, and sometimes I thought I could hear the singing of a dear friend of mine who was probably hundreds of miles away.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and dipped my face in the sink full of ice water before me. With a bare chest, I could see my heart through my flesh, full of healthy, pulsating blood. I felt a breeze blowing through the bathroom window. Outside it was sunny, and the winds were picking up.

I knew where I needed to go next. I needed to get my memory back. In my condition, I knew I was susceptible to more memory loss and even control. I had to go where I could find trust again. I had to find an elderly friend whom I known as Mary.

I traveled by plane miles south of the border to Chicago. I had a psychological connection with Mary, and I knew I’d find her there. I carried a backpack containing a change of clothes, a toothbrush, and a couple of smartphones (one issued by the CIA).

I arrived downtown, it was cloudy, and the humidity was high, but it didn’t stop tourism; pedestrians bustled the streets and tourist attractions. I ate a hot dog and enjoyed teenage street musicians playing instruments I had never seen before. That’s when I saw her, not Mary, but a younger woman. Her hair fell over her face as she sped along the sidewalk. Her soft skin glistened with a light sweat and worry, yet she was poised and determined to reach her destination. A hand purse clutched beneath her arms against a black dress tracing her slim figure. I felt she led me to where I needed to go.

Children played and screamed in Grant Park, and I felt my heartbeat pick up the pace. I watched the young woman in the black dress venture into a herd of tourists disappearing, and it allowed me to focus on my friend who was near. She sat alone on a bench, chucking sunflower seeds at the pigeons and squirrels nearby. I wondered what she saw or if she could see anything at all. She was the kindest person I knew; her gray eyes were filled with years of wisdom and mirth. She was blind but the way she interacted with the environment around her, one would think she could see through and beyond.

I stood before her on the bench creating a shade over her frail body. She wasn’t alarmed, instead, a smile beamed up at me and her eyes met mine. I kneeled before her and she cupped my face in the palm of her hands, “It’s been such a long time, my friend. I am so happy to know you again.” I smiled for the first time in days but I remembered nothing about this woman save for her name. I played with the thought that maybe she was my mother or grandmother. I knew her my whole life, or rather she knew me my whole life. She knew that I had suffered a defeat, “I hoped you would find me, now I believe it is time you find yourself.” Mary said, and her attention changed direction.

I followed her vantage point as I raised my head to see again the woman in the black dress nearby. Mary offered no further explanation as I looked back at her, “The woman on the phone?”

“You’re going to need more help than I can provide at the moment,” Mary said, looking down at her legs. She was feeble with decreasing mobility.

“You know my mission?” I asked.

Her smile swept away with the breeze that passed by and she took my hands in hers, “I know your mission, Iam, but first you must recover your memories somehow.”

I held her hands tighter, “You know what happened to me and where I come from?”

Mary nodded her head, “You have had a hard life, my child. You do not remember me entirely. You are looking for the Boy and at the same time, you must find yourself.” Her gray eyes were tired and weary, “You have been manipulated to do my nephew’s will, yet your heart has always led you precisely where you need to be. It led you here today. Don’t overthink anything, just do.” The woman in the black dress was no longer speaking on the phone and was leaving the park. Mary kissed my forehead. “Go, Iam, know yourself.”

I gathered myself to leave, unsure of exactly where to go next but I did not question Mary further. I was on a mission for recollection. The woman in the black dress kept my attention again as she successfully exited the park immersing herself in the onslaught of pedestrian traffic. I left Mary with a smile on her face, and the sun cracked through the clouds.

The woman was ahead of me, and she got to her car in a parking garage before I realized where she was. She drove past, and I watched her almost being killed by a caravan coming directly at her. Once I got her out of her car, she beat against my chest to leave her and save the other woman in the caravan. But there was no way I could since the other woman, the mother, was trapped in the caravan by the seat belt. The brakes had given out and she had lost control.

I rose after the explosion and waited for help to arrive with the woman. I rode in the ambulance with her and learned her name was Alissa. She was in a fragile condition on top of other complications the doctors wouldn’t let me in on.

She lay in her hospital bed for days, mostly out of consciousness. She wore a brace around her neck and tubes in her nose linked to a respiratory system. I came to visit her frequently in the hospital using my government official badge to authorize my visits. I was somehow connected to this woman, maybe in the past or the future. I knew that I could trust my friend Mary. I only wished she was more detailed in her direction. Mary ran a program in the city to help endangered and battered women and youth. I wondered if she knew Alissa because of the program or not. I considered Mary to be quite clairvoyant, and so I stayed in the hospital with Alissa when I could. I watched her sleep; she was in a temporary coma and would wake up sometimes and incoherently utter words before falling back into an abyss. Sometimes she would open her eyes and look at me as if she recognized me, and sometimes she would reach out her hand and take mine. She seemed to need me, and I felt I needed her.

After a few private visits, I was caught by a colleague of Alissa. His name was Alan Macintosh, and he found me sitting to the left of Alissa’s bedside writing on my smartphone’s virtual journal application.

“Hello, who are you? Are you the new doctor-” He said as I stood up, putting away my belongings in the backpack beside me.

“No, I am not a doctor,” I shook my head and thought to cover my identity. “I’m this woman’s... husband. Who are you?”

He looked taken aback, “Husband? I think you’re mistaken. This woman is *my* friend. I’m afraid you have the wrong room.”

I looked at Alissa lying with her eyes threatening to open. “Well, I can’t say this is the first time this has happened. Sorry about that! My mind these days, have a good night.” I waved my hands and exited the double-entry room, passing by Alan as he took my place in the seat.

He watched me exit,and Alissa began to stir as if she could feel the change in atmosphere with my immediate absence, “Hi,” Alan said standing bedside. He was surprised, and so was Alissa; she looked around the hospital room. “How are you feeling?”

“Alan? Where’s the man with the…heart?” She looked back at Alan and down at her body. It was the first time she was fully coherent after the recent events. “What happened to the… the mother?”

The machines signaled her rising heart rate, “I’ll explain; just try to stay calm.” Alan said.

But her eyes were red and swollen as tears flooded her face, “That poor woman.”

“Listen, you were in an accident but you’re fine.” Alan touched her shoulders gently.

“What happened to the mother with the family?” She raised her voice, and the Doctor entered with a Nurse holding a virtual chart.

“Good evening, I’m Dr. Reeves, how are you feeling?” The Doctor used a stethoscope to monitor Alissa’s heartbeat.

“I’m confused.” Alissa shook her head as more tears slid down her swollen face. The Doctor and the Nurse placed disposable gloves over their hands, “The last thing I remember was an explosion.” They adjusted Alissa’s neck, removing the brace from around her.

“Ms. Patel, we are so sorry to inform you that you were in a fatal car accident. I’m going to ask you a few questions just to make sure we’re on the same page, okay? Can you tell me what year it is?” The Doctor asked.

Alissa shook her head, “It’s 2070 C.E.”

“And can you tell me your profession?” The Doctor accepted the virtual chart from the Nurse and added notes as Alissa spoke.

“I’m a junior journalist at the Chicago Sunrise.” Alissa uttered.

“We’re glad to have you back with us. We have some health concerns to discuss immediately. Do you have any family or relatives to call and be here with you? Mr. Macintosh here has been helpful but he is not legally authorized for your discretion.”

“I got word from her parents. They’ve been on holiday and are having trouble finding flights out of Croatia. For now, I’m all she has.” Alan said.

“What concerns?” Alissa asked as she ran a hand over her face.

“Ms. Patel, I think it’s best to wait for your family to get here.” Alissa did not stir but held her gaze on the Doctor, who received her answer through the silence.

“I’m here for her.” Alan interfered, and Alissa accepted.

Dr. Reeves cleared her throat, “From our charts and x-rays, the impact of the airbag struck directly into your frontal lobe and you’re likely to suffer slight memory loss. The shock also triggered your neck and spine, and both are in a fragile state. I’m afraid we’re going to have to keep you here for some time until your marrow and short-term memory restores. On top of those injuries, you also sprained your top rib cage. Luckily we have medicines to help your body heal faster, but rest is demanded.” Dr. Reeves frowned as she turned a page on the virtual chart, “Ms. Patel, it is a miracle that you’re alive with the pressure your body experienced; with that being said, we had to perform an emergency operation in order to keep you alive. The impact on your rib cage was, unfortunately, too much pressure for the growing embryo inside you.” Alissa’s hands shot over her mouth, “Ms. Patel, were you aware that you were entering the end of the first trimester?” Alissa jolted in bed. The rest of the color that remained in her face was vanquished, leaving her desolate and empty. Alan stood beside her, just as shocked.

“Were?” Alan asked, and Alissa shook her head, unable to process her current reality. She touched her belly.

“Yes,” Dr. Reeves answered, “I’m sorry, Ms. Patel, we had to remove the embryo in order to keep you alive. With our current technologies, you won’t notice the difference. You should be healed in no time.” There was a long silence before Dr. Reeves apologized again and departed with the Nurse. She decided they’d discuss further medical arrangements at a later time and exited through the entrance I stood at in the hall, overlooking the happenings. No one questioned me as I lingered there because I wore my badge around my neck. The hospital was well-staffed and busy; the nurses scrambled around like headless chickens as the doctors walked glued to their tablet screens.

“Alissa,” Alan started. “I’m so glad you are alive.”

“I want to talk with your father,” Alissa demanded.

“What?”

“Where is he?” She looked at him with cloudy, red eyes. “I want my damn story!”

Alan stared at her, seeing a completely different person. “Alissa,” he shook his head and looked to the floor, “You’ve been here for days. They had to assign the publication to someone else while you were away. I’m sorry. If there’s anything I can do for you, you know I will.”

“You want to do something for me? Get out of my life. This is your fault, this has happened because of you. If it hadn’t been for your dad and your stupid suggestion, I wouldn’t have had any trouble. If it hadn’t been for you, I would still have my…” she trailed off and wept.

Despite her lashing, Alan tried to console her. She cried and fought out of his grasp, unable to see that he had tears too, “Alissa, was I the father?” It slipped from his tongue, and it seemed to silence Alissa as she lifted herself to look into his eyes. She stared, sapped of all emotion and words.

The last thing I heard was Alan being asked to leave, but my eavesdropping came to an end because suddenly, the pain in my heart had returned. The timing was impeccable, my vision faded as Alan prepared to depart reluctantly. A nurse found me in front of Alissa’s door, clutching my chest.

“Are you alright?” The nurse asked, reaching for me, but I raised a hand to keep her away. I wanted to scream because the pain was building greater, but I had to keep my composure in such a public setting.

The pain distorted my hearing, and I could no longer make out the words of the nurse kneeling before me, waving her hands for others to help. A stretcher arrived with the intent to put me on, and I shook my head to refuse the help but the pain conquered most of my strength and senses. My vision faded in and out as I was raised from the floor by multiple hands onto the stretcher. Amid the pain, I had a greater worry about being discovered. I was being drawn through the hospital on the stretcher as one of the nurses exclaimed, “Oh my god… his heart…” With the nurse’s revelation, all of my senses returned, and the pain began to cease ending the brief episode. “It isn’t here!”

I gathered some newfound strength and thrust myself from the grasp of the Nurses. They couldn’t stop me as I rolled on the floor. My hearing came back to its full potential first, and I could hear the reactions of everyone who discovered the trait that made me peculiar and unique. My vision returned next as I lifted myself back onto my feet, and as I did, my eyes met those of Alissa. She stood on her own a couple of feet from me, “It’s you,” she said. The nurses stood apart from me, staring at me as well. I raised my badge so that I could leave in peace. I turned away and Alissa followed me, “Wait!”

“Ma’am… ma’am, please return to your quarters.” One of the nurses beckoned to Alissa. I looked behind and saw Alissa disobeying the order. She had made up her mind about leaving because she was wearing a pair of shoes. “Security, we have a patient on the loose,” the nurse bellowed through a communication device on the lapel of her scrub.

I slowed my pace, allowing her to catch up with me, and we came face-to-face. She stared and asked, “Who are you?”

But the Security Officers had arrived and were approaching behind her. I took Alissa by the hand and led her down the hall through a door and a flight of steps.

“Hey, wait!” one of the Security Officers screamed after us, but we were yards ahead. Alissa was weak however and her adrenaline wouldn’t last. We traveled down the stairwell until we found another set of doors leading us to the exit. We ran outside into an alley, and Alissa started to give out and fell into my arms. I could hear the Security coming down the stairs behind me and I also heard sirens. I carried Alissa in my arms to the street opposite the hospital. The Security Officers arrived after us, but they were late; I dipped Alissa into a taxi that stopped for me. Once inside the taxi, she had become unconscious again. I remembered the address I saw on her identification in the ambulance and thought to take her home.

“Clark street, please.”

# Chapter 4

I woke up in my bedroom to my furry Malamute, Jax, licking my face. I was caught by surprise and I inevitably surrendered to the affection. He missed me, and I indefinitely needed the onslaught of love the puppy offered. “I’ve missed you, buddy.” I kissed him and buried myself in his fur. I realized it had been days, and I felt changed, but I did not have time to process it all because I learned we were not alone.

Jax ran over to the other side of the bedroom and graciously greeted the mysterious man who saved my life, and the same man who brought me home after some time away in the hospital.

“Hello,” he said, rising from the chair in the corner. I lifted myself from my bed. My body was weak, and I remembered that I had followed the man from the hospital, “Are you alright?” He asked.

During my time in the hospital, this mysterious man was all I dreamed of. I felt a little delusional when I discovered the component that made him unique to me, “I don’t know, I’m a little distraught.”

Jax came back to my side, and I noted the impression the man had over him. Jax trusted very few but seemed to have accepted the mysterious man whom I could not take my eyes off.

“I’ll explain everything in due time but for now I’ll share with you that I am a soldier and agent commissioned by the Central Intelligence Agency,” he said and revealed a titanium badge from his breast pocket. “I’m on a very time sensitive mission and I am uncertain of how much time I actually have.”

I stepped closer to him, “Why are you telling me this?”

“I think you know…”

“What do you mean?”

“I believe it’s the same reason you left the hospital with me… we are part of each other’s story. I believe that I may need your help.” He said and stepped closer to me.

I felt I needed him, but the fact that he needed me left me with a bewildering feeling. “I’m just a journalist. What could I do for you?” And as I said it, I had answered my own question. Just by staring into his eyes, I saw that he had a story; the story of a lone soldier and his kinship with the blind woman in Grant Park. Suddenly I was excited; I felt I had another purpose. It had only been some hours that I had become conscious of my accident and losses, but I was an ambitious woman and had no time to grieve. Suddenly what I had previously been through seemed to only be a hiccup.

“I’ve been employed to find a young boy and I don’t think I should do it alone.” He cleared his throat, “But for now, authorities are most likely looking for us and they’ll come here. You can stay and return to the hospital to recover in peace. Or you can come with me and become exposed to a world you never knew. I’m not going to persuade you with how lucrative a story like this could be for you because I’ve encountered lots of dangers on my missions before… Coming with me would mean turning your back on your current career and various relationships. It is my wish and my promise that I’ll protect you to the best of my abilities, Alissa.”

I shook my head trying to resist the spell I felt the man put over me, “I don’t even know your name,” I said. I could feel the warmth radiating from his body as he smiled with his eyes; it was the same warmth I experienced when he saved my life. It was a remote feeling of safety and assurance. I knew it had something to do with his heart which a nurse remarked before ‘…is not here.’ But that was a false statement. He indeed had a heart and it was the reason I found his presence to be god sent.

“I am Iam,” he said and I was humbled.

My life was far from mundane, but there always felt like something was missing. I longed for the day to utilize my full potential and learn something new. I didn’t have all the answers, and after the past few days, I felt I had nothing else to lose. Iam offered to open my eyes to a new reality, and I went towards it headfirst. I was a bit fearful, but my curiosity was greater.

I figured I had to move fast because the way I disappeared from the hospital was abrupt, to say the least. My purse and smartphone must have been back at the hospital. I had no way to contact anyone, even Alan. *Alan!* I felt horrible, and I couldn’t bear to think of how I made him feel. I was humiliated and ashamed in the hospital, and I did not stop to think that Alan could have felt the same. When I asked him to leave it was because I didn’t know what else to say. However, when he left, I found Iam nearby and my heart told me to go with him.

I stood in my bedroom and gathered necessities in a bag. I kneeled down and held onto my puppy for as long as I could, wishing he could come with me wherever we were going, but I knew that he could not. He was a gift from my father, who believed I needed protection moving to the big city all by my lonesome, and my father was correct; Jax had been a great companion, even in his most mischievous of natures. I knew the sweet old couple next door would care for him while I was away. I learned that Alan took note of the resource while I was recovering in the hospital. I slid a note underneath the neighbor’s door as I left and I signed it forging Alan’s signature.

I rushed out of my apartment building with a backpack plopping on my back and a hood to cover my identity. I got into an electric Lincoln with the mysterious man, Iam, not looking back on my decision.

We arrived in downtown Chicago’s Union Station because I suggested we take a bullet train to our next destination. “Which is where?” I didn’t want to ask too many questions at first, which completely went against the nature of being a journalist.

He paid for two tickets in cash for the bullet train number 9 to St. Louis, Missouri. It would take us 111 minutes to arrive, and he let me sit next to the window in case I started to feel weak again. It was really late, and my body obviously was not at one hundred percent. I felt safe with Iam, so I took the opportunity to rest my head a little…

I dreamed of Alan and how he must have been really shocked about the news as well. I didn’t like how I treated him and talked with him, but I didn’t know how else to react. I had never been so negligent to someone like that before, but I felt hurt and victimized. My dreams shifted to my lost embryo; I thought of what it would have been like if it had survived. I thought about Alan and I being together and raising the child and it all made me feel a certain level of elation. Learning of my baby’s existence gave me happiness that I could never find in an external source, but it was just a tease. Before, when I dreamed of being a mother, I dreamed of adopting. I always felt there were so many children roaming the earth in need that I didn’t have the excessive desire to bear my own offspring. But in my current dream with my child and Alan, it seemed to be all I needed. Then reality crept in and suddenly my child and Alan were gone, just like hours before when I asked Alan to leave when he asked if he was the father. I felt as if I had been to hell and back somehow.

I woke to find the bullet train in motion, but Iam wasn’t sitting next to me. I dozed off before departure but I did not panic. I reached into my backpack and pulled out a smart tablet that I found at home before I left. I felt in many ways I was doing the right thing by going with Iam. Still, my parents would be worried, so I sent an email to my family, who were still on vacation, and let them know that I would be away for a while and that they would not be able to contact me. To Alan alone, I wrote him a message telling him that I was sorry. There were no other words I could think of, and after some internal debate, I erased it, thinking that it would not allow me the time I wanted away from him and the accident.

Iam returned to his seat, and our eyes met as he sat. The lights from the bullet train flickered in his eyes, and I admired them because I wasn’t reminded of suffering. “You’re awake,” he said. “Are you feeling a little better?”

I smiled even though the answer was no. But I felt a great deal of serenity in his presence. “Do you know who I am, Iam?”

He pointed to the tablet in my lap, “You are the Alissa Patel who busted a few members of the renewed Chicago Mafia, correct?” I blushed. “You’re a great writer. I didn’t anticipate meeting you at Grant Park that day, but…” he trailed off for the sake of mentioning the accident. “… when you were in the hospital, I was able to do some research on you. I think you are the one to tell the story.”

“Your story?”

But he shook his head, “The story of what is to come and the Boy I’m looking for, who is quite significant.”

“Who is this boy? He doesn’t have a name?”

Iam hung his head in shame, “I don’t remember his name… but it’s important that I find him because…he’s just like me.”

I was amazed and ready to know how it was possible that his heart and that of a boy were so different. He looked out of the window at the train speeding through a tunnel underground. “I should thank you for saving my life and trusting me with this story. But how are you like this?”

“First, you must understand that I have little recollection of who I am. It sounds strange but I cannot even recall when I was born. I have a drastic case of amnesia; many things that I know about my past or mission are through word of mouth. But when I focus enough, I achieve details of my world. While I sat with you in the hospital, I recounted being from an underground society called ‘Project Benevolence.’ It was a confidential project that compensated and provided amnesty to families who volunteered to participate. My father worked as an engineer for the U.S. Navy and had been rumored missing for most of my childhood. My mother was essentially widowed and poor because of it, and the program offered to take care of us substantially since she was taking care of my brother and me herself. I’m not sure how my mother sought or was approached to join Project Benevolence, but I was the first to be enrolled.”

“Who was in charge of this project and what was it for?” I asked.

“There was a developmental engineer revered for his bio-nuclear weaponry and warfare. He was hired by the CIA to create super soldiers for the unannounced pending Nuclear War at the time. He was heavily sponsored, and he went into the lab to construct humanoid soldiers in a private facility called Precinct Ground Zero. He is the Scientist, Dr. James B. O’Donnell.” Iam said.

“The famous Dr. O’Donnell is behind this?” I exclaimed.

Iam nodded, “Mhm, But Dr. O’Donnell had another purpose and it wasn’t in the creation of soldiers of war. His true passion was to save the human race, which is why he birthed, discreetly, Project Benevolence. I was the first child ‘born’ in Project Benevolence after Dr. O’Donnell’s successful operation of taking my heart from the left…” He then took my hand and placed it over the right side of his chest. “… and replacing it with a bionic cardiovascular to the right side.” I felt my DNA crawl at the connection with Iam’s heart. It was beating, just as I remembered, on his right side.

“That is fascinating, I thought I was dreaming before when I felt your heartbeat!” I bloated. I removed my hand from his chest, “How is this possible? How will you save humanity?”

“I pose as a Ground Zero soldier because it was the only way Dr. O’Donnell could keep me alive under the surveillance of the government. He figured that biologically we homo sapiens are perfect beings, but with one minor (yet major adjustment), we could be superhuman. Those like me, the ‘superhuman race,’ would save humanity simply by being.

“I am the prototype, the most imperfect revelation of the Scientist’s polar objectives; one was to destroy, the other was to administer life. But I am flawed and sometimes I fear beyond repair… I suffer a great deal of pain in my chest - internally, it is a wound that never healed. It makes me more susceptible to over-stimulation and ultimately manipulation. It stems from the operation when the Scientist was connecting my new heart to the vagus nerves that connect to the brain; it wasn’t performed as securely as his latter subjects and he was never able to repair this flaw.

“It is the reason I was discovered there in the hospital before you came with me. I feel the vibrations and frequencies of every person, environment, and entity with a heightened sensitivity. Before I would take medicine to alleviate the pain but for the past two years, I’ve been learning to live through it.”

“Is there nothing that can stop your pain?” I asked.

“I’ve come to learn that when I feel more positive vibrations, it has proven to be a natural remedy. That’s what led me to Chicago to find a friend, which led me to you and I think it is because you have an abundance of positive energy within you.”

He smiled and it seemed to have cured me. Since fleeing from the hospital, I felt an emptiness within myself, and then that feeling was fleeting. Every burden I ever had seemed to disintegrate with his smile. Even more so, I blushed, “Me? You are the remarkable one… I’m just a regular individual. How do you mean?”

“It was interesting getting to know you these past few days. I knew you were trustworthy because even in your moment of despair, your innate instinct was compassion for someone else. It suggested to me that you have a lot to offer.”

My eyes watered, “That’s very nice of you to mention… thank you… But I would like to know more about your mission. How did you, the Scientist, and this Boy get separated? The kid sounds to be very important if he has the attention of the great Scientist.”

He shook his head, “I haven’t found that out just yet, but I am anxious to find the Boy; he is about two years old, and he is the very first to be born with a right-sided cardiovascular, without operation.

“His mother escaped with him from Project Benevolence for reasons unbeknownst to me. The Scientist sent me, and I’m sure others, to search for them because you’re right, the Boy is important. His heart is rumored to be just as fragile as mine, and without the proper medicine, he won’t survive long. The Scientist wants me to find and bring him back to Project Benevolence before he’s discovered and tested on by enemies.” Iam said.

“That makes sense, I suppose. But I’m not understanding why this would be difficult for you since you seem to be close with the all-powerful Scientist.” I said.

He looked at me with grave sadness in his eyes, “This is why I need your help.”

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Alissa, I don’t know whom I can trust. My friend Mary pointed me in your direction at the park, and I did not question it. It is true Dr. O’Donnell, and I have been in close contact, but he does not seem to be a friend. In some ways, his tone suggests that he believes I’ve helped the Boy escape somehow and am hiding him. I can tell that he doesn’t trust me either.”

“Why is that, Iam?” I adjusted in my seat.

“It occurred to me that the Scientist is responsible for my memory loss. He’s erased my memories before, and I think it is because I discovered something and rebelled against him, and in return, memory erasure is my punishment. As of a couple of weeks ago I lived among a tribe of monks in the Karakorum Mountains with no idea how I got there. I had to learn their language and customs. I had a belief that I was 125, 221 days old and that I had been a nomad since the day I was born. The monks helped me realize that was clearly a lie. They taught me many things, and I learned them quickly. They helped me heal my mind clear of deceit in reference to space and time, and they helped me realize that I had a home.

“The Scientist contacted me, and at first, I did not remember who he was. He told me a plane was to pick me up from my location so that I could meet with a man named Federico Gonsalves in hopes to deliver a message. Federico recognized me, and though he was distraught, he did not seem to be a bad person, in fact, his reaction assured me that I had to reconsider my employment because I thought that the Scientist was a good person too. But with Federico’s help, I remembered; the Scientist is planning something, and I am helping him do it.”

“What, Iam?” I said with a bead of sweat forming on my brow. “What was the message?”

“That we will begin another war… a second Nuclear war.”

# Chapter 5

I followed after Iam exiting the train at the St. Louis Skyway Platform. He carried our bags, and we both kept hoods over our heads. “How can that be?” I inquired.

It was nearly 3 a.m., and the moon was hidden behind a row of clouds. We got into an electric car. “Private mode, please,” Iam said to the car, and a window rose, separating us from the mechanical driver. “Paranoia is rampant from the last war as it is, no one wants to think of another one.”

“Of course it is! Will you please tell me how there’s going to be another war?”

“I don’t remember exactly, but I was able to conclude that the gentleman, Federico Gonsalves, has access to nuclear intelligence that I’m currently uneducated about. But he did indicate that the Scientist is planning an assault and setting up a defense. Although I am an advocate for the Scientist’s plan, Lieutenant Gonsalves has asked me to stop him.” Iam said.

“Why are you an advocate, and why can’t you stop him now?” I begged.

Iam shook his head, “I don’t know, I told you, I just learned about this mission, and this Boy I’ve never met. I feel I must cooperate with the Scientist if I’m going to because Dr. O’Donnell is the only one with the remedy for the Boy’s heart.”

“I understand, but starting a war is the pinnacle of extreme,” I argued.

“I don’t disagree with that, but I have an inclination that this is how Dr. O’Donnell has chosen to respond to the Pentagon’s decision to cease and desist further possessions and properties of Precinct Ground Zero. That includes the innocent lives of the Benevolent participants. This is the conflict that I have to find a way to stop.” He reassured me.

“Are we going to meet the Scientist now?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Iam replied, opening his backpack and placing a wallet full of foreign bills into it. “We are going to see another man I’ve known my whole life… my brother.” He closed the backpack again. “Maybe he can help with my memories.”

“Is he from Project Benevolence also?”

Iam shook his head, “I don’t think so, and I don’t remember the last time I saw him. While I sat with you in the hospital, his name played in my mind, and I looked for him online. I have a feeling he’s here in St. Louis because I saw a recent photo on the internet with my brother and the mayor.”

“Is he a soldier then?” I asked him.

“I have brief moments of clarity that I’m acting upon. His occupation is foreign to me. My recollection is still a blur, but we have to act fast. I can only hope that he will help us because we’re going to need all the assistance we can get.”

I learned lots of things from Iam the rest of the journey. He was incredibly clever, eclectic, and efficiently informed on a multitude of topics. Our conversation drifted into lighter discussions, and suddenly I felt carefree amid times of distress. He could be quite charming and amusing, making me laugh heartily multiple times. He told me stories of his travels and meeting various groups of people as he began to recollect important memories. He spent time in various countries in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East and even sailed to South Asia. He told me about all of the significant languages he had learned and the oral history of various cultures. Though heavily affected by blurred names and faces, his memory was quite unique; he could recount recipes from his favorite dishes and sounds that motivated him. He told me about the first physical battle he ever fought and even the first time he fell in love with a woman whom he, unfortunately, could not visualize at the moment…

It made me think of Alan and my dream earlier. It was a scary feeling being so vulnerable to someone when I had been raised to be strong and independent. But it was easy with Iam; I felt I could listen to him talk for days. I was not this way with many people. With Iam, people were glad to see him. His dark skin radiated at a level where people naturally gravitated towards him, yet I was the one who got to be so close. Iam loved to spread good energy, and he did it dutifully to all who passed by us.

We arrived at a small hotel on the outskirts of downtown St. Louis, and we had breakfast in the lobby. There was a woman with three small children unable to pay for their stay, but Iam paid their fare as well as ours. The woman thanked him graciously. She told us a brief story of her escape from her abusive husband, and Iam gave her the address of his friend Mary, “She helps women just like you. If you can make it there, tell her Iam sent you. You’ll be welcomed with open arms.” The woman balled her eyes out and while Iam and I smiled at the woman’s children. This made me feel helpful to Iam’s mission already. I was grateful to be in his presence, and so was this family in need.

I rested in the hotel room as Iam searched for more information on the virtual web. He was determined to find the Boy, but first he felt it necessary to find his brother who could potentially have further knowledge of what was going on.

The search took longer than Iam hoped. It suggested that his brother was under an umbrella of surveillance just as grandeur as that of Project Benevolence or Precinct Ground Zero. We spent copious amounts of time in libraries and city parks, hoping for any sign of where to look next, but Iam was sure we were close. We’d go about incognito and didn’t let it hinder our venture through the city. He refused I pay for anything because I did not have cash and he didn’t want to risk our location with virtual currency. Sometimes he would take his mind away from the search and we occupied ourselves with happenings in the city. I got to know him on levels beyond the surface, and soon I completely forgot about the life I left behind. He made me feel like I was starting anew. He was a leader; women admired him, and men wanted to be him. He was obviously strong, but his gentleness was enlightening. His philanthropic personality made him ultimately handsome and popular. Though his acts of kindness were spontaneous, they were consistent. Quite often, he would remove money from his pocket when I was not looking and leave it for a homeless person we’d pass on the street. There was a moment we’d lie in the grass of a city park because I had grown tired of travel, and I’d watch him smile up at the clouds in pure bliss. If there were street musicians and performers, he would sit in the front row and enjoy the show.

One night I insisted we share a dance after dinner. I knew we were on a mission, but I was enjoying the time I had with him. It felt like I was on a sort of vacation from my old reality, and I was aside from myself. We were dressed nicely, and the restaurant we dined at played beautiful music. Suddenly he was irresistible to me…

The lights were dim, and his hands were placed on my waist as we danced. The space between us decreased as the music softened. I could barely catch my breath. This was an entirely new and different realm for me. I was in a new world and just like Iam, it was bold and incredibly stimulating. I’d never felt more vulnerable than when I found myself in his arms, just like when he saved me from my accident. I felt nourished and I wanted to keep it. His level of compassion, strength, and sensitivity was overpowering my senses. I imagined everyone felt this way in his presence, but I longed for it.

I lost self-control; I took his face in between my hands. I reached up, and he allowed me to plant a passionate, small expression of my feelings on his lips. He stepped back mid-kiss, releasing me from his embrace. Without a word, he left me standing alone on the dance floor. I felt like a foolish schoolgirl, watching her crush speed away with another. I went after him.

I found him outside of the restaurant, looking below at the river under the moonlight. I went by his side, and he gazed at me with those gentle eyes. “I’m sorry.” He said, even though I had already forgiven him for his desertion.

“Is it because you are in love with someone else?” I had hoped not.

“Yes, that is part of it. I’m ashamed and embarrassed to admit that I can’t recall her name or her face.” He sat down by the riverbank, hanging his feet over the water below. I joined. “From the moment I first saw you, I’ve pondered that maybe you were her.” I hung my head, fighting the tears that I had for both his heartbreak and mine. I was not the one and I didn’t know how to feel. “The other reason,” he continued, “is that there is also someone who loves you.”

I shook my head, “But, he doesn’t make me feel… this way.”

“He is a good man.” He took my hands in his, “I saw it from the first time he entered your hospital room, he loves you -”

“Spare me.” I rejected everything he said and began to cry. I didn’t care for his rationality. I only cared that I wanted him, I needed him, and his logical reasoning was unacceptable. The past was forgotten; I was concerned with the present. I focused on Iam, and Iam was focused on his mission. He looked away and let me rest on his shoulder at my realization that this sort of excursion was temporary business. We spent the rest of the night at the riverbank, sharing more insights and stories with one another. I was able to calm down and I got to know this stranger a little more. I hoped he would not abandon me.

The next morning Iam, at long last, discovered coordinates in a confidential database online. By noon we arrived at the address provided in an affluent community on the outskirts of St. Louis. The home was incredibly modern and a bit secluded from the other homes in the neighborhood. The house blended in with the surrounding trees and other green plant species. Iam rang the doorbell, and a voice responded from an intercom, “Hello?”

“Cain, it’s me, Iam.” Almost instantly, the buzzer sounded and granted us access to Cain’s lavish home. A man, slightly lighter than Iam in complexion stood awaiting our arrival in a high-ceiling living room. Iam stood before the man I took to be Cain, who definitely looked of relation to Iam. The two were similar in height and mannerisms, but Cain was more muscular and appeared slightly younger. It seemed near impossible for either to conceal their smiles at the sight of each other. Cain paid me no mind as the two embraced with mirth and laughter.

“You’ve grown so much, Cain,” Iam said, laughing.

“But you’re still the older one.” Cain laughed as they separated. “It’s good to see you, brother. How did you find me?”

I took a look around the house; the floors were shiny black marble floors with a trace of gold between the cracks. Digital portraits of Cain’s family and paintings decorated the walls.

“I’ll have to fill you in. First, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, Alissa.” I reached my hand out for Cain to accept.

“Pleased to meet you,” Cain said. “What do you think about interior design? My wife designed our home herself.”

“That is amazing, this such a lovely home!” I beamed and a painting on the wall nearest to me caught my eye. “Is this your wife and daughters in the picture?”

Cain acknowledged the painting I referenced and then looked at Iam. “Yes, those are my girls,” he said, a touch of melancholy in his voice. He changed the subject before I could interpret the information, “Please come in.” He led us through the space to a grand sofa and other delectable furniture. Cain had a similar charm as Iam, and it resembled throughout his home. I sat on a scarlet sofa over a white carpeted floor. Cain sat on a chair parallel to the one Iam decided to occupy.

“How are things?” Cain asked as a humanoid house servant entered and served us all a glass of red wine from a tray.

“Things are… a bit blurry.” Iam accepted the glass but then placed it on the coffee table in front of him. “But how could I forget you? I want to know about your life. What’s going on now?”

I took a sip as well, or maybe a gulp because I noted the mood had changed. Cain sat back in his seat, his glass still in hand, “We can skip the small talk, brother.” I winced at the change in tone. Then I could see the resentment Cain kept inside. He knew that Iam was there for a reason. “What is it that you need now?”

Iam adjusted to the shift, leaning forward in his seat and giving me a swift look before, “Well, I would like to know how you are doing and to see if we can help one another. My memory has been tampered with, again… I can’t seem to remember the last time I’ve seen you.”

“Don’t worry about it. You went on a mission some time ago and lost yourself. But let it be; the past is the past. Maybe it’s a good thing that you don’t remember everything.”

Iam looked stern, a sternness he did not use with me, and Cain mirrored him. Their brief moment of happiness with one another subsided, and now it was the time for business. “Well, I’m sure you know best, however, I am serving as a pawn in a war I disagree on. I have learned that I am a Special Activities Soldier for the CIA and have been assigned a new mission, and that is why you came to mind. There is a boy whose heart is just like mine. The Boy has significance because he was never part of Project Benevolence and…” Iam paused at a realization he experienced at the moment. He looked at the floor and then at me.

“What is it, Iam?” I asked and Cain cut his eyes at me.

Iam looked back at his brother, “He is of possible relation… he could be my son.”

Cain exclaimed, “Oh?” I was equally surprised.

“The boy’s mother… she’s run away. I don’t know how long I have been searching for them, and I don’t know Dr. O’Donnell’s motives as well as I should like. They’ve tampered with my mind again. I’m three-hundred and forty-three years old, you know?” Cain looked as if he wanted to laugh, but he kept it in. Iam continued, “I’ve learned something invasive… Dr. O’Donnell is…”

“What?” Cain asked.

“… is possibly an enemy,” Iam concluded. I finished my glass of wine and noted how lightheaded it made me feel in lieu of the conversation.

Cain stood and drank the final gulp of his wine. He turned his back on Iam as he placed the empty glass on the tray held by his humanoid servant. “And you think acting against him again will give you a better result?” The humanoid servant refilled his glass.

“What do you mean ‘again’?” I interrupted, standing from my seat. Cain looked at me, “You know what they’ve done to him?” I demanded, but Cain ignored me as he replaced himself in his chair with a refilled wine glass. I sat back down, letting the servant take the empty glass from my hand. I started to feel dizzy.

Cain drank his wine, “I don’t know how well you know my brother, but he isn’t the most stable of people.”

Iam stood up, “That is why I’m here to ask for your help. I can’t do this mission alone. I’m going to find the Boy, and when I do, I would be grateful for your assistance.”

Cain stared up at Iam, contemplating a response. He placed his wine glass on the coffee table, “You still think you’re Superhuman, don’t you?”

Iam stood still, his confidence never faltering, “What?”

“What happens if you can’t help them at all, have you ever thought about that?”

“Cain, listen to me.” Iam touched his heart. “I’ve done my best to be an honest man, and I will continue to do so. The Boy has complications, and his mother most likely can’t see a doctor without the government discovering his heart. They could experiment on him.”

Cain stood then, “If he’s really your son, you’d be doing him a favor to stay away!” He stared at Iam, his veins popping from the rage he expressed and contained simultaneously. At any moment, a fight could break out between the two it seemed. Fortunately, something caught Cain’s attention outside of the nearby window which calmed him down. Sun rays shined on his face, distilling peace as the P.A. feature of the home announced, ‘Front door open.’ With a renewed sense of kindness, Cain continued. “No more crazy adventures for you, Iam. It is time to grow up. It is time for you to face life like the rest of us. You are not a god; must I be a reminder, you’re a fugitive.”

The comment was like a slap in the face. His words scared me, and it was a perspective that, up until then, I greatly unconsidered. I had run away from the hospital with a ‘Wanted’ man after discovering I had survived a fatal car crash. Still, it overlooked how unique Iam was and his story with his heart and background.

Cain turned his back on Iam again as a young girl by the age of five drifted into the room. She was the older of the two little girls in the painting, and she wore a school uniform with a bow tying her hair behind her head. She gave a smile to Iam and me after hugging Cain.

“Hello,” the girl spoke, breaking the tension in the room. I stood up as Iam stared at the girl.

“You’re back from school so soon today?” Cain asked.

“It was a half day, remember?” She smiled and turned to face Iam as he knelt to her eye level.

With watery eyes, “Yarah?”

# Chapter 6

Yarah’s forehead wrinkled, “How do you know my name, and why do you look like my Uncle?”

*Uncle?*

“It’s time for you to leave.” Cain interfered.

Iam dropped his head as he slowly rose from the floor. “What’s going on, Iam?” I asked.

He couldn’t answer because Cain shouted, “Iam, get out! If you can remember her then you should probably have figured out by now whom I work for. They’re probably on their way after you as we speak. Consider this warning as my assistance.”

Iam looked at me, but I didn’t know what to do. I watched and heard everything, and still, I did not know what to even think. Iam, however complied with the order he was given, “I’ll wait for you.” He said to me and left without another word. I broke out of my stupor and I gathered myself to follow him.

“You wait here.” Cain demanded, stopping my advancement to the exit. He then turned to his niece and lifted her face, “I have to tell you something… it is something I thought to wait until the right time; I wanted to wait until you were mature enough. That man is my brother… your father.”

“He is?” Yarah began to cry.

“Yes, but he is sick and that is why this may be the first and only time you will ever meet him. He has heart complications and the problems affect his brain in unorthodox ways, making him unstable. It’s best he lives apart from us. That is why you have me.” Yarah buried her face into his stomach, wrapping her arms around him.

I was nervous and my heartbeat felt faint. I didn’t feel well, and I realized I was a long way from home. I wished Iam would return and save me from further neglect. I’d gone in too deep. At that moment, my fantasy of this mysterious man was defeated.

“I want to meet him again!” Yarah cried.

Cain looked at me for a brief moment before removing Yarah from him, “For now, I want you to go upstairs with your aunt and cousin. I will be up after I speak with our new friend here.” And just like Iam, Yarah obeyed without dispute. She exited up the stairs, sniffling and bathing in tears. I hoped I could walk out at least in the same manner, but by the look on Cain’s face, I was in for some really bad news.

I wasn’t myself. I felt foolish and overwhelmed. It was as if Iam had been my strength, and now that he was gone, I didn’t know how to function again.

“How much has he told you?” Cain asked.

“What?”

“You people do anything for a story.” He accused.

I stood my ground, “It’s not what you think-”

“I guess it doesn’t matter. I know who you are so let me tell you, my brother is a special person, and any information can and will be used against you.” He picked his wine glass up from the coffee table and drank.

I stepped closer to him, frustrated, “You’ve got it all wrong!” But he wouldn’t listen.

Cain picked up next a smart tablet from the coffee table and, with the projection feature, illuminated a virtual screen displaying the USA Today headlining: “Chicago Journalist Kidnapped by a Mysterious Man.” Below the headline was a photo of myself and one of Iam.

I was at a loss for words, and I felt too weak to explain. I sat in my seat, rubbing my eyes. “What’s the matter, you didn’t think I’d recognize you? No one’s going to believe you if you try to expose him. There will be many forces against you; you’d get sent to a modern asylum before your word is taken for truth.” He presented a badge from his pocket issued by the CIA, similar to the one Iam had. “I could send you home and let you return to your life, or, arrest you for conspiracy.”

I felt like surrendering and I put a hand on my forehead, “Please-”

“You feel it, don’t you?” He smiled and pointed at my empty glass. “You didn’t drink just any red wine. You drank a glass of the most lucrative import anyone can receive from the south of Spain; the blood of the Andalusian, the Warhorse. Light and powerful, it has quite a chemical effect on the human psyche. For experienced consumers such as myself, it enhances my senses and instincts to the rate of the Andalusian itself. But for beginners, its effect expands on any existing self-afflicting pain of the consumer. You’re trying to fight it, I can see but I’ll tell you what’s going to happen...”

He stepped closer to me but then stopped when he heard footsteps coming down the stairwell. Yarah had returned with a new pair of shoes and a dried face. “Uncle Cain,” she interrupted, saving me from his fright, “I’m going out to find my papa.”

Cain turned from me to Yarah, “I can’t have you do that, Yarah.” His voice softened.

“This may be the only time I have to speak with him, and I don’t want to miss it.” She resembled her father.

“You’re just a child. How are you going to find him?”

“I’ll go with you!” I seized the moment to escape. I stormed past Cain to join Yarah, and to my surprise, Cain allowed it. Yarah looked away from her uncle and to me. She was ambitious and intelligent at such a young age, and I hopped on her bandwagon. I exited the home with the five-year-old girl.

I followed Yarah to an electric car parked in the driveway. “Whose car is this?” I asked, climbing into the back seat.

“Mine,” she said nonchalantly as she climbed in. She started the auto-drive function of the car, and I felt I was in good hands. I took one last look back at the house and the thought of Cain made me shiver. I wanted to find Iam. I couldn’t believe he had left, but he was running from something, and I had to find out what.

The car shifted into motion, and the residential street was some yards behind us when Yarah asked me, “Do you work for my papa?”

“No, I do not.” I answered, “I worked for a newspaper in Chicago and one day, your father saved my life. He has become a friend since then, and I vowed to help him in return for saving me. Your uncle gave a lot of insight to you already on who your father is; it is true, Iam is a very special person. His heart isn’t like yours and mine and it makes him different. It has also got him in some trouble and so Iam came to your house to find answers.” I may have forgotten I was speaking to a child and delivered too much information, the way Cain did before because she started to cry again.

She looked at me and said, “We have to find him. Do you know where he could be?”

I shook my head, “I don’t know the city too well.” I was getting more weary at every turn. I leaned on the car door to help me keep my composure, but my head was aching, and I wanted nothing more than to be with Iam again.

Yarah pressed on, “How did you meet him?”

“I told you, he saved my life. Before that, I only ever saw him at a… park.” I shook my head, recounting the accident; I thought of the children of the woman who was killed in her van. “This could be a shot in the dark,” I knew that he wouldn’t go back to the hotel. I assumed, with the amount of intelligence and power it seemed Cain had access to, that our dwelling location had been compromised as well. Instead, I felt that he was waiting in a location similar to where I met him. I thought about his friend Mary in Grant Park. It was a stretch for him to hide in public, but what other choice did he have? “I think nature helps him a lot. There was a garden that we were in earlier where I think we can find him!”

Yarah changed the coordinates of the internal GPS. We arrived at the illustrious City Garden and got out of the car. We walked through the maze-like garden, and I was beginning to lose confidence with every bend. I thought for sure Cain would interfere, and I would be too exhausted to make it. I just had to see Iam at least once more.

The sun was at its peak, and the brightness blinded me. I put the pain out of my mind, kept my eyes low and kept going, and by divine intervention, we found him. He looked slightly different; I had the thought that maybe he was actually as crazy and deranged as Cain made him out to be. He became aware of us and smiled. Yarah hid behind my leg, and Iam laughed at a time like this.

“I think you remind her of her mother as well.” Yarah blushed and stepped from behind my leg. She stared at him, and he approached us. “I’m so glad to meet you, Yarah.”

He smiled at me, but I knew this moment was about the two of them. It was strange to hear Iam say this to his daughter, but as I learned more about who he was, the more strange I found his world to be. Still, Iam was kind and warm, and it was a beautiful moment. His presence began to humble Yarah in place of intimidating her.

“Do you know where my mom is?” Yarah asked as Iam knelt before her again.

Iam shook his head and removed hair from Yarah’s face, “I am looking for your mother and your baby brother. Somehow we all got separated, and I am going to reunite us.”

“My brother?” Yarah smiled. “Are we going to be a family?” She was excited, and Iam saw it.

He took her in his arms, “You already have a family. Your uncle Cain is a good man. I knew when I needed help that he would take great care of you. He is the father I could never be... you believe me, right?” Yarah nodded without hesitation, and Iam smiled. “I will bring your mother and brother back, and we’ll be together.” Iam stood and looked at me now. “For now, we have to move.”

Sounds of rubber burning cement roared behind me. I turned to see six armed humanoid officers exit a black military Jeep decked in SWAT gear. Without warning, Iam took my hand and pulled me in the opposite direction as the SWAT Officers made their way through the Garden’s maze. Iam held Yarah in his arms, hers wrapped around his neck.

We ran for what seemed like miles out of the Garden and through the city blocks, but the SWAT Officers were fast, and I couldn’t keep up with Iam. We turned into an alley, and Iam allowed me to catch my breath. He placed Yarah to stand on her own two feet, and suddenly, Yarah’s car pulled behind her meeting us in the alley. I was astonished when I noticed the small remote attached to the silver necklace she wore under her top. The doors to the car opened, and Iam helped Yarah into the back seat. I stepped to go next, but Iam held a hand back to stop me.

Yarah noticed, and she reached her hand out to help Iam enter. He took her into his arms once more and said, “Go home.” He released her with a smile, and she began to cry, but the doors to the car closed anyway.

We took a step back as we watched the car drive away, and I was stuck in a daze; I really needed to rest. Iam hid us behind the building as the SWAT squad arrived on foot in the empty alley. Just as Iam anticipated, they ran after Yarah’s car. Iam stuck out his foot and tripped the last officer of the formation to the ground and snatched the gun from it as he did.

I screamed as Iam pulled the trigger releasing a round at the SWAT officer’s head which split open from the impact. It no longer functioned as its fluids oozed from its metal skull.

“Androids.” Iam spat as the others turned around and pointed their rifles at us. Iam dropped us both to the ground as the Androids shot at us.

“They’re assigned to kill us?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around the situation.

But Iam did not answer me and instead sprayed the humanoid officers with bullets until all four fell down.

I rose from the ground, catching my breath, leaning against the building behind me. I watched Iam with the rifle placed in his hand, standing over his conquered opponents, and I thought, this is what he meant by ‘posing’ as a Precinct Ground Zero Soldier.

“Wait…” he turned to me, “I counted six.” I looked over my shoulder as the last standing humanoid officer snatched me from the wall, taking me into a bear hug.

I screamed and squirmed in the titanium arms of the android but there was no way I could shake lose. “Surrender inoperative.”

“Alissa, be still.”

“Wait!”

Before I could comply, Iam took the shot. The muffler drowned out the sound of the bullet braising past my ear into the head of the android. I fell to the ground along with it.

Iam came to my side, “Are you okay?” I took a couple of breaths before I nodded yes. He didn’t move me too soon in case I was experiencing a shock. I found refuge in Iam’s presence again, however. I had to see for myself he was who I thought him to be. Just like before, I felt a warmth and that I trusted him more than ever.

The pain I felt before was depleting. I could almost feel the rhythm of his heartbeat pulsating opposite mine at that moment as dark clouds swept over the sun and lukewarm raindrops fell from the clouds. I threw my arms around Iam’s neck. He saved me again. I could hear sirens from police cruisers in the nearing distance. “Iam, what is going on?” I bellowed, and he lifted me from the ground, standing me on my feet.

# Chapter 7

We found a boutique motel on the outskirts of town that would serve as our new accommodations. It was discreet and clean. I arranged prior to meeting with Cain for our belongings to be transferred by the hospitality personnel. I understood where my brother’s allegiance stood, and I did not depend on anything else. I felt guilty because everything was going to the Scientist’s plan. There were few I could trust, and at the moment, it was only Alissa. I couldn’t afford to put her at risk again. I knew I had a lot of explaining to do, but at the same time, I needed to focus. We ate food from a local delivery but Alissa could barely eat. She mostly drifted in and out of sleep.

My mind had been racing. I had thoughts about everything and some of them were of Alissa and her courageousness. Like the previous location, we booked individual rooms and I motioned to leave, standing at the door.

“What are you going to do now?” She asked,

“You should get some rest.”

“Please, don’t leave me alone,” and I obeyed. I was glad to have her as my companion at the time of my memories returning. Good energy would be the only thing that could help me reinstall memories to fulfill my mission.

I sat on the floor as Alissa lay in bed asleep. I contemplated further on finding the Boy and his mother. I learned a valuable technique during my time in South Asia, and it took me some time to master it. Some refer to the technique as mindfulness. I learned to focus my mind on a subject and only that subject.

After an hour of no results, I was feeling restless. I had to look on the bright side, though, because I made tremendous progress. Since meeting Yarah and Cain again, I was able to focus more on what the Boy and his mother were like. I sat then with a higher consciousness. My concept of time had begun to return, and so had my innate qualities of a real human being. I just had to keep going.

I longed for the days I could experience a normal life. But I was a soldier through and through. I knew how to follow orders. The plans of my own were always secondary, or so they were in the past.

My mother enrolled me in the Project Benevolence program very young. I was born with congenital heart disease, making me the perfect candidate for the Benevolent program. After my cardiovascular relocation operation, I became an overtly endowed young boy. It took months for me to recover from the surgery, and once I had, the Scientist called me superhuman. My combat skills came in handy for a lot of the missions the Scientist would send me on. I was often deployed, even before my maturity, to fulfill special tasks the Scientist would assign me. I had been his prototype, and my mother had no complaints since it changed our lives drastically, both physically and psychologically. She knew I’d be a soldier, but different.

I used an increasing 12% of my brain as a youth, but because of the severance, my cognitive beliefs could be controlled more than the other Project Benevolent citizens. I had heightened speed and strength; I became balanced and ambidextrous, and my intelligence and coordination were refined to a level most masters don’t achieve until later in life. My mother was proud. She and my younger brother Cain would bring me baked treats on her visits to the Precinct Ground Zero facility where I lived. She wouldn’t let Cain join the program because she wanted someone at home with her until my father was found. He had gone missing after working on a mission in Montenegro. He was presumed dead some time later, but his body was never found. My mother clutched onto Cain more because I too was gone with a nuclear war on the rise. Dr. O’Donnell offered her a yearly stipend in addition to my participation in the program, and my mother accepted because she believed the Scientist’s vow that I would help save humanity.

The presentiment I faced began to decay, and I visualized a stranger, an old man on a farm some ways northeast of where we were. I opened my eyes, unable to decide if maybe the old man was someone I knew. It didn’t matter; he was whom I would find next. I trusted my intuition because I had nothing else.

“Iam?” I turned to find Alissa sitting up in the bed with her smart tablet beside her; she had been checking her email and messages. She did not smile like she usually did with me, “There’s a message here from…”

Cain’s voice vibrated through the tablet’s speakers, “… my niece returned home trembling. If you are with Iam… tell him he’ll never see her again. I’ve done my best to protect her from this, so stay away. Your problems are no longer mine.” The message ended, and I couldn’t hide my shame.

“Iam?” Alissa said, and tears resided in her eyes.

“Alissa, listen to me,” I stood from the floor. “You are not obligated to stay with me… If you want to go home…”

She rose from the bed, “I want to help you.” She let the tears fall from her eyes, and I knew that she cared for me. I went to the door and opened it. “Where are you going?” She asked.

It was still raining in the night sky, but it didn’t stop me from going out. “I need some air.” I didn’t close the door after me, and I could feel her watching me as I walked out in the rain. I lifted my head to the sky. I wanted to scream, yell, curse, or fly but I stayed put. I felt Alissa brush up beside me.

“Iam, what is it?” She asked.

“Something bad is going to happen, and I can’t stop it.” The rain blended with the tears flooding my face.

“Yes, you can.” She said, but I shook my head, and she put a hand on my face, “And I am helping.”

This time I kissed her without thinking. She reminded me a lot of my wife; the Boy’s, and Yarah’s mother. In fact, I thought maybe she was my wife. She wrapped around me and I found refuge. The rain poured over us but she had no care for anything else in the moment. It was the same for me.

# Chapter 8

I sprawled and reached over only to realize I was alone in the motel bed. I couldn’t decide if my post-accident experience thus far had been some kind of dream I had yet to wake from, but it had been quite an exhilarating experience. I only knew exciting worlds through films and video games before. Now my reality of being a fugitive, fighting with android police officers, and romance with an elite soldier fulfilled me. I was so far removed from my office work. I had no plans to return to my idle life; I devoted myself to a nomadic life with Iam. I was so engulfed in these thoughts, I failed to think of the war and anything else. I was stuck in a daze.

Iam was not in the room but I could still smell his scent and feel his essence. I made myself think that maybe he had gone out to get us breakfast so I didn’t worry about his absence at the moment. I wore a smile on my face I could not wipe away. I looked through the blinds and saw the beginning of dawn. I drank water from a paper container and decided I’d bathe as I awaited Iam’s return. But after an hour in the bathroom, I realized I was still alone in the motel.

The daze faded as hunger and restlessness took over. I waited a little longer in bed as I recalled Cain’s wine and the claim he made about it. I didn’t believe it, but I had begun to feel delirious suddenly. Or maybe I was beginning to panic that something bad happened to Iam because he had yet to walk through the motel door.

Maybe more androids had come for him and sparred me. My shoes were placed near the bathroom and I realized my belongings were the only items left in the room. I got out of bed and noticed a folded paper note slipped under the door on the floor. It read, “Go home,” and nothing else.

My good thoughts vanished and were replaced with anxiety as I recalled my accident, the missing Boy, and the rising of the mad Scientist’s army. After a blissful night, the perspective that I had thrown my life away to run off with a man I barely knew was of no concern.

I was dizzy and confused as I put on clothes somewhat damp from the night before. I gathered my things and left the room, passing by the neighboring door Iam booked for himself but it was empty too. I was nervous in a place I did not know. I refused to believe Iam wrote such an empty note and abandoned me. If he was in danger, then I could be too.

The sky was gray and threatening to rain again but I walked far and wide to find Iam. I went back to the City Park, and I went to the restaurant where we danced and the river bank we sat near. I went to the first hotel we stayed in, and still, there was no sign of Iam. The rain started and I stood at a bus stop hopeless and hungry. I put the hood of my sweater over my head to hide my identity as a police squad car passed me by. I continued onward.

After hours of searching, I found myself at the bustling train station in which Iam and I arrived days ago. I was soaking wet and shivering cold, and the Aspirin I took did not help much. I looked through the station for any sign of Iam there. I noticed a lonesome male figure with a hood over his head and hoped he was Iam. The pain in my head blurred my vision, disallowing me to see the man’s face as it peered down at a virtual tablet. I felt weak but I was convinced I knew the man and was eager to reach him, “Iam?”

Once I got to the man, I had exhausted myself. I stood before him but he had yet to acknowledge my presence. Before I could make any further notions, I had fallen to the floor and the man put his tablet aside to help me. I was in pain and I could not stop my eyes from rolling back. I felt the man try and pick me up from the floor, “She needs help!”

Instead of the moderately comfortable mattress I began the day in, I woke, pulling my face from a freezing metal table in a cold dark room. I tried to remove the hair stuck to my face, but my hands were handcuffed and chained from the floor to my metal chair. I wore the same clothes. The only light in the room swung slowly in a single light bulb over me and the table. The last thing I remembered was fainting in front of a man I mistook to be Iam. I had hoped it was Iam, but judging by where I woke, I must have been discovered by someone else.

The door to the room opened and I could only make out the silhouette of the figure entering. First I noticed the glass of water the figure placed on the table in front of me. “Where am I?” I asked but the figure ignored me.

He pulled a chair out at the table opposite of me and finally, the light revealed him, “Cain! How did I get here? Where is Iam?” I croaked.

“I’ll be asking the questions here, Alissa Patel.”

He reached into his suit jacket and displayed his union-issued titanium credentials before me, “I was not properly introduced to you before, I am agent Cain David, Chief Lieutenant of the United State’s fourth-ranking Precinct Ground Zero. You are being held in a Southern Illinois correctional facility for your recent accomplices of national conspiracy with the terrorist organization, Project Benevolence. Have you anything to say for yourself?”

I had never been in a situation like this and up until then, I hadn’t ever even been arrested. Now I was in an interrogation room, involved in activities beyond my realm of knowledge deeper than what Iam shared with me. Because of Iam’s tampered memories, I lacked a proper education in the matter as well. In addition, though Project Benevolence was classified as a terrorist organization I recalled Iam against it.

I stared into Cain’s eyes, and it reminded me of the blank stare my father would give me during a game of poker. I knew these accusations were nothing to play about, but Cain’s methods were those of a player. He was trying to scare me and I was curious as to why. I sat back in my seat and I mirrored his face. I would try to keep up the act even though I continued to feel dizzy.

“That was your invitation to speak,” he dropped a hand forcefully on the table. “I can understand what you’re going through right now. I was ignorant before; I had no idea about your… accident until today. I understand it must have been a traumatic experience, but joining someone like Iam is not a healthy response. Unfortunately, your involvement must be taken seriously and conducted as such. With your following testimony, I’ll be able to decide an accurate judgment. I can help you, but it’s up to you.”

“Where is Iam?” I asked.

He frowned and sat back in his seat now, “You mean the fugitive you attempted to kidnap a five-year-old girl with? After destroying hundreds of thousands of dollars of national technology while inebriated on imported wine. Now tell me what is your exact involvement with Project Benevolence?”

“I don’t belong to any organization and I won’t answer any further questions without a lawyer present,” I said and I would have loved to drink from the glass of water placed on the table in front of me.

“I don’t think you understand the gravity of your situation, Alissa. I can publish whatever narrative I’d like and keep you here. You won’t see your loved ones for a very long time, nor get a chance to live a normal life.” He pressed on.

“Tell me where Iam is,” I reiterated.

“You will tell me what I want to know.”

“Where is Iam!”

“Tell me what you are planning with him and the program?”

“A man saved my life and in return, I agreed to learn about him. Other than that, I never knew about any organization therefore, my record’s clean.”

He leaned forward in his seat, “Let me put it like this, I can make it unclean.” He rose from the table, “I can even get you to plead insanity, say, if you were to publish anything of about what you heard or seen since you met Iam. Or I can issue you a formal accusation on behalf of the Federal Court if you were to spread such gossip.”

“What are you really worried about? If my memory is your biggest concern, then why haven’t you erased my memories instead of offering me horse blood? I drank this wine as a little girl. Why don’t you stop wasting both of our time! Do you want me to deliver a message or what?” I challenged.

He stared into my eyes and I knew I had won. He stooped below the table and the handcuffs fell from my wrists, “Actually, I want you to deliver a warning.”

I rubbed my wrists, “But I don’t know where Iam is. When I woke up this morning, he was gone. There was a note…”

He leaned on the table, “I know they found your whereabouts, I could not stop them.”

My eyes widened, “We thought you sent the androids.”

“I did not. I’m trying to help Iam as best as I can. But I am a soldier as well, I too have orders to follow.” He said as he pushed the glass of water to me.

I accepted his peace offering and drank from the glass. After I was quenched, “Can you please tell me what is going on? If what Iam says is true, that Dr. O’Donnell is responsible for both Precinct Ground Zero and Project Benevolence, then you too are part of the plan to overthrow the government.”

He stared at me again, “Dr. O’Donnell is angry; the government found the Project Benevolence theory to be useless, and the Scientist has to end it. After all he’s done for his country he is still treated below his potential and with mistrust. After years of court trials and assessment defenses, the government chooses to disregard what the Scientist considers his most important work. The Benevolent citizens were to save humanity and so the Scientist devised a plan to do just that.”

“With another war - a civil one at that?”

“You cannot stop what is to come. Nor can Iam.” He stood up straight for the table, “I have a feeling you will be in contact with him before me, so I want you to tell him to stop fighting. Either he wants to cooperate, or he can be no more.”

He turned his back to me and I stood, “You can’t blame him for not wanting a war!”

“I don’t expect you to understand, but the same goes for you. I’m only letting you go because my brother’s fond of you, but I won’t hesitate to change my mind.” He received a notification on his virtual smartphone, read it, and looked back to me, “That’s all we have time for today.”

He came to me and escorted me out of the dark room and into the whited-out corridor of the correctional facility. A lone white door waited at the end of the hall. “What about this Boy, Iam’s son? Why does the Scientist need him?”

“Something Iam doesn’t know; the boy is not in hiding, he is being hidden by forces loyal to Iam.” My forehead wrinkled with more questions but Cain squeezed his hand around my arm, “Listen fast, the citizens of Project Benevolence are scheduled for termination in a matter of weeks and it is imperative the Boy returns before then. Iam must know if he wants to save anybody.”

We arrived at the door and Cain pushed through it into the facility’s waiting room with fluorescent white lights. “Alissa!”

I looked for the familiar voice but I could not see through the virtual force field which separated us until, “She’s good to go.” Cain said to the android clerk sitting at a white desk behind a glass window hanging from the ceiling.

The android pressed a button on the desk and the virtual wall rose and I saw Alan awaiting me in the small white room. “Oh my goodness, Alan!” He ran to me and hugged me tight. I almost felt relieved but I was confirmed with bad news.

“Are you alright?” He asked, taking my face between his hands. I was cold, exhausted, and disturbed further by the interrogation. For the sake of further trouble with Cain, I remained silent. Alan took me by the shoulders, “Did they hurt you?”

“She’ll be fine.” Cain interrupted, handing the rest of my belongings to Alan in a plastic bag.

Alan glared at him while accepting it. He then wrapped me in his arms and escorted me out of the facility, “Let’s get out of here.”

# Chapter 9

I plucked hay from my face as I woke in a haystack that reeked of manure and soil. I was traveling in a car of a freight train which contained chickens, and sheep, along with a poor family of four. We traveled at eighty miles an hour or so and the door to the car remained open. I could see the sun nesting behind dark clouds in the east. The rain subsided but my clothes were damp. My hand was bruised and I knew it was because I was in a fight. I leaned my back against the wall of the car in order to close my eyes and focus.

I was with a woman before whose name I could not recall; she rested but I sensed trouble approaching. I didn’t have enough time but I wrote a brief note for the woman and left the motel room while it was still raining. They found me near the train tracks before I could board a random passing freight train.

One punched me in the kidney, the other put a hood over my head, and another struck me over my heart. I fought and was able to knock back a couple of them, but they worked together to overpower me. They weren’t androids, they were Benevolent, like me and they attacked as a quad. The Scientist was getting more powerful. They removed my hood and I saw one holding a light sensor in their hand. I could hear a train coming. They flashed the blinding light before me but before too long I headbutted the device from the hand. I used all my might to knock off the others and I launched myself to the open door of the freight as it passed by. I paced my breath.

The efforts of my assailants were in vain because I was determined never to be subject to memory loss again. I had been working on a defense for some time now and I decided I would no longer suffer from it. Anything I had forgotten, I would learn again.

One of the children of the family began to cry and I opened my eyes. The sun had risen momentarily over the clouds and I saw it stretch over the beautiful landscape out of the freight car’s door. I closed my eyes again, and I remembered my revolt against the Scientist and more. I reached further into my mind, and recount pivotal moments in my life…

I was seven years old, and the Scientist sat across from me at a small table. A chess board set between us. He thought it best to develop my cognitive abilities, and it was my turn to move. I decided to take his bishop, and in the next move, he removed a pawn in front of my king, “Checkmate.” I was frustrated, but I shook his hand as we did after every match, and he said to me, “Never depend on the kindness of others.” He rose and left me alone to ponder his words.

It was the middle of the night, and I was screaming in agony. I was nine years old, and I was all alone in the darkroom of the Ground Zero facility. The government had found out about my existence and ran independent tests on me. After some discussion, they ordered Dr. O’Donnell to cease all Project Benevolent operations. I would be allowed to become a Ground Zero soldier after I matured since my surgery could not be reversed. I did not understand the politics of my existence and involvement with Project Benevolence at the time. I did worry, though, that I would not see my family, and I would grow up in isolation.

The war had just begun and was in full effect, and I wanted to stop it. I would read about all of the deaths in the news, and it would pain me. I lay on my back, clutching my heart. It felt like it was going to explode until, finally, someone came to help me. It was my friend and nurse, Mary. She was always kind to me. I would look into her eyes, and they would remind me of clouds. She presented me a liquid elixir and I swallowed it. She held me in her arms as the medicine sank in, alleviating my heart of the physical pain, allowing me to rest.

“You should not coddle him,” The A.I. computer board in my room suggested to Mary. “He is to become a warrior.”

“Hush,” Mary protested. “He is still a child.”

I had just gotten news that my father had died after being reported missing for seventeen months. He was honored by his division in the Navy for his valiant efforts in engineering for his country. The Scientist allowed me to stay for a couple of weeks with my mother and my brother Cain, who was four years old at the time. I would go into town to do errands and get appliances/groceries for the household. I would do this alone because my mother was grieving, and Cain was too little to join me. The war was still raging and it made food and water very scarce. Most people at the time had to travel far and wide to get necessities. I vowed to convince the Scientist when I returned to help my family because they shouldn’t travel during the hard time. The roads were infested with bandits and thieves, making the journey quite hazardous, but I did the work to help while I was there. I’d wake up early and take a bus into town twice a week.

One morning Cain followed me. I left on my way to the bus stop when I heard some footsteps walking behind me. I turned around and looked into Cain’s big watery eyes. He, too, was afflicted by the news of our father’s death, even though he didn’t really know him.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him and put a hand on his shoulder.

He looked up at me, “I was scared.” I could see the trail of tears drying up on his face.

“What scared you?”

“Well, I woke up, and you were gone… just like Papa.” He began to cry again. “Can I go with you?”

This was the first time we’d spend time together outside of the Project Benevolence facility and parental guidance. “Yes,” I took his hand, and we made our way to the bus stop. The bus arrived, and I paid our fare. Cain sat in the window seat.

“Iam,” he looked at me before the bus took off, “why do you have to live far away?”

I shook my head, “When Papa would go away because of work, he would always say, ‘if you keep me in your heart then we are always near.’ There is no space between us, brother.” It seemed to cheer him and take away his sadness. We played a couple of games, and he pointed to objects he would see out of the window.

“Iam,” he turned to me again, “can you make a promise? Promise you’ll never leave like Papa.”

I shook my head, “I’m sorry, Cain. I cannot promise that.”

He began to cry. “Why not?”

I took his hand and placed it over my heart. “I’m different… more than anybody else.”

He stopped crying, “But why? It beats the same as mine.” I smiled, and I placed an arm around him.

“I will always be your brother, and we will always take care of each other. Right now, we both have to be strong for mom. We are family, and we love each other.”

He accepted my words, and it was a great day.

I was twelve years old, and I sat across from Dr. O’Donnell as we would so often did with a chess board sitting between us, and that day would be the first time that I would win a match.

The United States was advancing in the war, and the Scientist had already begun sending me out on stealth and rescue missions, but he was never satisfied. He was confident in my abilities and pleased with my cognitive progress, but upon my chess victory, I learned that he was preparing me for something far greater.

My thoughts led me to when I graduated from the facility’s made-up ‘high school’, which was created so that Benevolent citizens could feel we lived relatively ‘normal’ lives. I appreciated it because my mother, the nurse Mary, and my brother Cain all attended. It also was the first time I had met the new engineer in training; her name was Iyla. I was awestruck when I saw her and when she touched me, it was like lightning to a kite.

“Why do you look at me like this?” She asked me during the graduation reception.

“Because I can’t decide if I fear you, or am in love,” I responded. I knew she was the one, and she felt it too.

My missions had become more frequent and I spent less time at Precinct Ground Zero. Usually, I enjoyed being abroad, but with Iyla in the picture, I was eager to get home. I would perform my tasks with haste because Iyla was stuck on my mind. During one particular visit home, we could no longer conceal our romance, and the Scientist forbade it. Iyla was fired from her position, and I was furious. Since that day, I began to rebel against the Scientist.

There was a time I deserted my employment and lived with Iyla in her home country in South America. With her, everything was great. We got married discreetly after a couple of weeks of living together but it was short-lived because the Scientist found us. He confiscated me from her and erased her from my memory entirely. I returned to work on behalf of the Scientist but I had a feeling that something wasn’t right. However, without Iyla distracting me, I performed my duties of helping Dr. O’Donnell align his secret plan into the world.

On one of my missions in Bosnia, I subsequently met Iyla again; she had been searching for me after losing communication for some time. She kissed me, and all of my memories returned. She told me that she was my wife and had never given up trying to contact me even though the Scientist made it nearly impossible. I was furious, but she made me promise to keep it a secret in hopes to avoid the Scientist’s wrath. I complied, and I would go see her once a month while she worked as an artificial intelligence engineer on the remote island of Madagascar.

I came home after being stationed a year overseas. My brother Cain was graduating from high school. Dr. O’Donnell said that he would offer him a job. We were all happy for a stint until my mother fell ill after contracting a virus caused by Nuclear radiation exposure in the lungs. She passed away, leaving Cain and me alone. He came to live at the facility while he studied and completed his undergraduate education. During this time, we were able to form a closer bond.

For a little while I was able to live a double life unsuspected by the Scientist. I would enjoy bouts of a normality with Iyla in a small town in Madagascar where we lived. We were happy raising our daughter, Yarah, together. We spent a lot of time aiding people in need. The artificial intelligence she manufactured in Madagascar ran hospitals in communities with the need of few human potential. Iyla oversaw the minor bugs the hospital would experience, and it was a successful operation that helped a lot of people. I would work in any capacity that I could while still employed with the Scientist. I would send photos to Dr. O’Donnell of what I did in the hospital, and he was pleased. But I never would mention Iyla and our growing family. It was on the countdown of Yarah’s third birthday when we learned that Iyla would give birth to a new baby in nine months.

Being together was difficult, and we thought of ways we could make it better and never return to the States. We thought that I could leave Precinct Ground Zero altogether and move on with our lives. It would be a difficult conversation with the Scientist, and it never seemed like the right time considering what was happening with him personally and the world. I found it impossible to have the conversation, so I continued my missions, sometimes in vain.

If the Scientist was to discover our romance again, I didn’t know what he’d do. We had only hoped that he would eventually accept that we wanted to be together, but the reality was the Scientist had become restless and obsessive. When his appeal to reinstate Project Benevolence was exclusively denied, he allowed very few people around him. He had become more introverted and trusted very few, myself included. He was skeptical and wary of spies the government used to keep him in line. He decided it was time for plan B: war.

Iyla had reconnected with her father after some time estranged. While I was away, she wanted to be closer to her remaining family. We were visiting her home country, Guyana when we met her father, Federico Gonsalves. I could tell he recognized me by the way he pronounced my name. He held an affiliation with the CIA as well but had become disassociated. He was a hermit, retired, and more than happy upon our proposal to move to Madagascar during Iyla’s second pregnancy.

He was helpful and when Cain was getting married back in the States, I felt comfortable attending the wedding, just Yarah and I, since Iyla was in no condition to travel with the baby coming. Federico vowed to look after her until I returned.

Cain’s wedding was beautiful and he was happy to meet his niece for the first time. But the mood changed when the Scientist, who declined his invitation, made a surprise showing at the wedding. Yarah cried when Dr. O’Donnell smiled at her in which Cain and I felt relief. He showed no immediate anger or outbursts due to the exposure of my secret life. Instead, he was initially curious about Yarah and more invested in her than the wedding.

I was able to avoid many in-depth conversations about my family with him during the wedding reception and had thought to be in the clear. Alas, I spoke too soon because upon Dr. O’Donnell’s early departure, he turned to me, “It was lovely to meet your little one, Iam, however, I’m dying of curiosity.”

“What is it, Dr. O’Donnell?” I asked, hoping he hadn’t changed his mind. Yarah cried in my arms again.

“I just have to know, since you succeeded in keeping your child hidden from me; does her heart resemble her mother’s, or is it *similar* to yours?”

I felt as if we were sitting across from our routine chess matches. I stalled as long as I could to respond, “It resembles *your* mother’s.”

He hesitated to extend his hand to bid us farewell. He held it and gave me a smile that I took as acceptance. He departed peacefully but suddenly I felt I should leave the country earlier than I planned. Upon my exit from America, I packed with the intention to get Yarah back to her mother, but I received a call from Cain summoning me to his new home later that night. He warned me of the surfaced rumors that the Scientist published an order to make me forget about Yarah and Iyla. There was nowhere else I could go. Mary couldn’t help me, and there was no way to change Dr. O’Donnell’s mind. He was enraged and regretted ever trusting me before.

I held Yarah asleep on my shoulder under blankets. I could feel her little heartbeat; she was already missing her mother so far away from home. The rain poured behind us as I stood in Cain’s doorway, “Cain, please, you have to get her back to her mother somehow, I’m begging you.”

“You realize I work for him now! I could jeopardize everything taking her to your wife.”

“I will tell you exactly where she is,” I looked him in the eye, “I just want her to be safe.”

Cain had tears in his eyes, “How could you have been so stupid!” He barked. He had never been so angry with me before, but my actions put us all in danger. “You should have come alone.”

“I’m sorry, brother, I wanted her to meet you.”

He reached for her and placed her over his shoulder. “Maybe this will be the last time we see you.” He embraced me briefly and stepped back into his house without another word, closing the door in my face. I would be defeated by the Scientist yet again. I was happy, and it made me blind to the unkindness of others, even someone as powerful as Dr. O’Donnell. I had no time to fret because the time would come when he’d find me and punish me as he had before. I created a new goal; I had to find a way to relearn my memories.

The green scenery flashed past my eyes on the freight train and I felt it was time for me to move on even though my body could still feel my previous fight. Once the rain stopped, I jumped off of the freight while passing a small town. The children waved goodbye to me as the freight train carried them along. I felt I was close to my destination recounting the vision I had. As I landed on a concrete pavement in a colorful garden, my heart started to give way. I took a knee, clutching my chest. Another episode, but I refused to feel inadequate. In actuality, I had gotten stronger. I realized the pain wasn’t trying to kill but instead tell me something. I rose from the ground and continued on a path that felt like it was paved intricately just for me. Though I pushed through the pain, my heart was fading fast. At some point, the pain conquered my sight, and I could barely see the path I followed. The pain grew larger, numbing many parts of my body. I kept pushing through because failure was only the path of least persistence. I was fueled by discipline and could not be discouraged.

I stumbled into the town’s center like someone possessed and to a small gift shop with a “Help Wanted” sign hanging on its storefront. I entered to find the old man I saw during my final evening with Alissa. *Alissa!* I had forgotten her name. My time with her returned and my heart pained even greater. It was an excruciating sensation recalling the accident Alissa suffered where she was stuck in her car, and me removing her before it exploded. I recalled her voice and roaming around the city. She reminded me of Iyla in many ways because of her determination, ambition, and kindness. I met many people in travels and have been in many dangers but what stood out to me most were moments of unconditional compassion. I crouched in the doorway to the floor as I remembered abandoning her in the motel. I heard the frightened reaction of an old man nearby as I fell face-first into the floor. I fainted and could barely move. Though I was fading out of consciousness, I had an epiphany: this pain only came because of returning memories.

Before passing out, a gentle voice croaked, “Teresa, bring some hot water!”

# Chapter 10

Alan and I sat across from one another in a diner booth, silently. He thought it best I eat before the six-hour road trip north. Though I was hungry, I barely had an appetite, and I was too exhausted to formulate thoughts and conversation.

I was apprehensive to tell Alan anything and he didn’t pry. He only said, “I’m here whenever you’re ready to talk.” However, I couldn’t open up if I wanted to. Cain succeeded in scaring me. I knew not the appropriate words I could say to make the situation any better. I also felt embarrassed that Alan had to drive to that place to retrieve me. I had been missing and it surprised me when I realized how much it affected him. We never knew each other emotionally and apart from our company’s party, we rarely spent time with one another outside of work. I did not know his aspirations and direction in life. We romanticized each other in the office, occasionally flirting and lunches, but he had yet to formally ask me out. However, he was always sweet and attentive to me.

“How are you doing?” I asked him while picking at potatoes on my plate.

“Me? I’ve been worried sick about you.” I looked him in the eye. “Your parents are home, waiting for you.”

“I have a lot of explaining to do.”

“It’s not your fault… you were abducted. And to think I saw the guy in your hospital room like some creeper. I should have called the police.”

“He’s not a creeper!” I defended, and Alan bit his tongue. “I was not abducted either.” I wanted to be angry but I was not. I was more so concerned about Iam, and I wanted to find him. I didn’t expect Alan or anyone else to understand my experience. I did not anticipate meeting Iam, and in more ways than none, he was my savior.

We avoided any further complex conversations as I rode in the passenger seat of Alan’s car. I could tell that he was confused by my behavior. He thought that I was suffering from our unbeknownst pregnancy loss because he was in pain too. I wept discreetly so he wouldn’t see.

We arrived at my building, and he walked me up to my door. My parents were there, and so was my two year old puppy, Jax. Alan stayed for half an hour before he kissed me on the brow and left. My dad held me until I was ready to sleep, and that night, I cried in Jax’s fur. He licked my tears away until I fell asleep.

I didn’t leave my apartment for a week. My mom and dad would walk Jax for me and cook us dinner. I accepted their company, but I barely spoke. My father would try different methods to get me to talk, but his magic didn’t work. He was someone I admired the most, but I had changed. I was stuck in my mind, and the only person who would get me out of my head was to be Iam. I spent most of my time doing what I hadn’t had the time to do before with Iam; I researched for information about Project Benevolence and Precinct Ground Zero. My research was in vain, however, because either it was that much off the radar, or it didn’t exist at all. I searched for right-hearted individuals, and multiple articles surfaced on the internet about a term, dextrocardia; a condition so rare that the concept was foreign to many medical practitioners. I traveled deeper into the rabbit hole of the internet and found a rumor online magazine article about a mother refusing to take her child to the hospital for fear of experimentation. But the article was brief and entirely disappointing, so I gave up the search for the time being and allowed the company of my parents to distract my yearning.

I was beginning to think the world of Iam and Cain was a figment of my imagination. I went back to work at the newspaper and everyone treated me with sympathy. I sat at my desk like a zombie and co-workers would tip-toe past my cubicle. My boss, Linda, walked on eggshells around me as well. When she spoke, it was apparent to me that she was choosing her words carefully. She, too, joined the ranks, offering me sympathetic smiles and treatment since the consensus was I had been kidnapped. They thought I was suffering a mental breakdown and could erupt at any moment. No one knew the true cause of my absence or accident, and as far as I was concerned, they would never know. They waited for me to dispel my silence and write about my abduction, but I would bore them when I pretended like it never happened. Then they would leave me alone. The only person who treated me almost the same was Alan. We would have coffee every morning, and for the most part, he was the only person to whom I spoke. He would make jokes and come over to have dinner with my parents. He was patient and kind to me, and I was getting comfortable. I accepted the fact that I probably would not meet Iam again, and Alan was surprisingly still adamant about being my male companion even in the state I was in. I did not enjoy much of anything and I rarely smiled. I did my work, and I went home.

The 25th anniversary was approaching, and so was my 25th birthday. I wasn’t in the mood to celebrate and I felt like being alone. My parents refused to leave. With them being retired and flexible, I couldn’t shake them, but eventually, they let me live alone at least. They found a condo and made plans to move to Chicago to be closer to me, and I could not protest. After losing my own unborn baby, I could imagine the fear they had of losing me, their only child.

One day after work, I visited Grant Park and sat there for hours, watching children enjoying their youth. I hoped to see Iam’s friend there as well, the old woman, Mary, thinking that maybe she frequented the park. Unfortunately, that day, she never showed.

I took the Subway home since I was not ready to drive just yet and while on the way, I thought to call Alan’s father, Roy Macintosh. He answered, “Young lady!” he exclaimed. “If it’s not too much to ask, come over for dinner.”

This time I did not reject. I had nothing else to lose and so I met with the Macintosh family. I arrived with Alan, and his mother and father welcomed me with open arms. There was a familiar energy I felt with Roy. I recalled that he had a story for me about the war. We waited until after dinner to talk about it because Mrs. Macintosh had had enough of hearing Roy’s war stories.

I sat in his study with a glass of wine and Alan sat beside me, and we awaited to hear the testimony Roy had for me the night of my car accident. Roy worked as a mechanic after graduating high school and volunteered to fight in the war twenty-eight years ago after enrolling in the Navy. He claimed to not have much action at first, but when he did face death for the first time, a miracle occurred while he was stationed on an island in the Alaskan peninsula. He worked as a crewman on a U.S. submarine and told us about a particular battle underwater…

“… Over three days I did not sleep, for three days we fought to defend our camp. I was peaking on adrenaline one night as I fired missile after missile at those Russian jerks. I hit a few of ’em but eventually my luck had run out and I was hit.” His submarine had been blown to smithereens, and he was usurped from the ship. “We were far from the ocean surface and freezing. I thought for sure I was a goner. Just as I accepted defeat, I saw a light, and something grabbed me; it was a boy, a teenager almost, and he took me along with a couple of other gathered crewmen up to surface. I was dumbfounded because I had never met a kid as unique as him before, and little did I know, it would be the only time that I would meet him. He made me feel like I had no worries at all, in the sense that I hadn’t just vomited arctic water from my lungs after being trapped yards below the ocean surface in the middle of the Bering Strait.”

The unique boy sounded familiar to me, “What do you mean he made you feel that way?”

“No one ever believes me, and I wouldn’t have discovered it if I had ignored my curiosity about the kid. I was barely conscious during the whole interaction, but the kid took my hand and placed it on his chest. I gained some strength and warmth in order to survive from freezing to death, and I could feel that his heart was different than anybody else… it was on the right side of his chest!” My eyes widened as Roy continued. “I asked what his name was, and I’ll always remember… his name was Iam.”

I dropped the wine glass on the floor and rose from my seat as if I had been struck by lightning.

“Alissa, are you okay?” Alan stood and rubbed my back.

“Iam?” I breathed, making sure I heard him correctly, and Roy nodded.

He stood now too. “For as long as I’ll live, I long to meet Iam again. He’s probably a man now with a family of his own, and still, I hope to meet him. He was an angel, and he saved my life.”

Tears ran down my face and I couldn’t stop them. Alan took me in his arms, “What is it, Alissa?” But I could only weep on his shoulder and stare at Roy. He didn’t move and he looked back at me too. He knew that I understood him.

“Please, sit.” Roy urged.

I shook my head and removed myself from Alan’s grasp. “I’m so sorry… I should go home.” I wrapped my arms around Roy, “Thank you for telling me your story.” I released him and looked to Alan, “I can call a car.”

“No, Alan should take you home,” Roy volunteered and smiled. “Thank you for listening, Alissa.”

Alan took me home, and I continued to cry. I was careful not to be that way in front of anyone since I returned home. Jax had been the only witness of my tears until then and I couldn’t stop. Alan’s father meant to tell me a story about a boy called Iam on the exact day that I met him myself. I played with the thought that maybe this was some kind of sick joke and everyone was involved. But Roy’s story felt sincere and true. He felt alone in the matter of Iam, and I did not have the courage to share my own account with him at the time.

Alan walked me to my door as he so often did, “Alissa,” he said softly as I put my key in the door. “I just wanted to ask - I want to ask because I know I’ve never said this before, but Alissa…” He stepped closer to me. “I care about you a lot. I don’t know how it happened, but I do. And so I wanted to ask you if you’d let me be here… with you? Because I am here for you.” I felt myself running but in place, as I pressed my head against the door. I was at a loss for words but he earned my trust and I had to tell him the truth. He took my silence as an answer, “Alright, goodnight.”

“Alan,” I turned to him and he froze.

“I want to tell you everything.” He turned back to me, “I don’t know where to begin, but come inside, please.”

He followed me into my apartment and my favorite soul, Jax, provided his routine greeting of joy and kisses. I closed the door behind us. “Alissa, what is going on?”

I was no longer worried about being misunderstood. With Roy’s confirmation, Iam and his proclamations were true. He had been transparent with me and I felt myself liberating from the chain of silence. I was blind to who I had in front of me. Alan was the man Iam suggested loved me. Before I was a spoiled little girl and I had been humbled. My whole life had been handed to me on a platter, lined with fruits of my parent’s labor, and now was the time I had to confront who I really was. “I never got to thank you before for being there for me. I really appreciate it. I can understand how I reacted has probably been tough for you to understand.”

“It’s been difficult, but you - we - have been through a lot, and now I’ve met your family, and you’ve met mine - we’ve become a family,” Alan said.

The days of fighting had ceased. Iam was special because he knew how to communicate unconditional love in every word and action. The Scientist’s hypothesis on human kindness was exemplified in Iam; he brought to fruition a higher consciousness, and one could feel it. I imagined a city of people like Iam, and it sounded like heaven. Before, I was headstrong and saw emotions as weaknesses. I vowed to never be vulnerable as I maneuvered in the professional world. After meeting Iam, I had been forever changed. “You have become my family, it is true. Now it’s time I tell you everything.”

I started from the beginning, from when Alan and I met a year prior to our drunken night together. I told him how I would run from my emotions and advancements of men, and of the morning I took a pregnancy test. The first test was alarmingly positive, but the second read negative and I believed that I wasn’t pregnant. I wanted to take a third test, but I didn’t want to jinx my luck. I didn’t want a baby at this stage in my life by a coworker I flirted with here and there. The day of the accident, I pushed away the possibility that I could still be pregnant even though I had been vomiting. I woke up in the hospital days later and received the news that I was going to be a mother and I felt pure joy. And then the joy was shattered right before my eyes like a rock to a glass house. I shared with him the way Iam made me feel and how safe I was.

I told him Iam’s story to the best of my ability; the placement and vulnerability of his heart, and what Roy felt too. I told him about Project Benevolence and Iam’s family and the Scientist, and I could see in Alan’s eyes how much of an overload it all was for him. I told him about spending time with Iam in St. Louis and the conversations we’d have.

“Why do you feel that way?” He looked at me as if he already knew the answer, “You’re speaking as if you… have feelings for this guy or something. He stalked you and put you in danger.”

“I can understand how it could look this way, but he saved my life. If you knew how I felt, you would have gone away with him too. Iam is special. You wouldn’t even exist if he hadn’t saved your own father, Captain Roy Macintosh. It’s a miracle, this story, and I’m a part of it. We must find him and I would like your help.”

He shook his head, “Haven’t you seen enough?”

“That Officer in the facility you picked me up from, Cain David, thinks that I can find Iam and help. I want to see this through. I mean, if what Iam and Cain were telling me is the truth, that we are on the brink of a second nuclear war, then we now have part of the responsibility too.”

“Ah, I get that part. I want to do more investigation before believing it but,” he stepped closer to me, “it just seems like you’re… emotionally involved.”

He saw through me. There was nowhere else for me to hide, so I surrendered. “I am emotionally involved because before the accident, or before I met Iam, I had no definite direction in my life and I didn’t know the suitable vocabulary to really express how I felt. Iam was kind, and he opened my world to all that we are. He said to me, ‘There is someone who loves you,’ and I knew that he was talking about you, Alan. It scared me before, the way you feel about me, the way you look at me. I was just a girl before, and now I can tell you that I care about you too. I’m glad that you are here.”

I had not had the courage before to say it, but I was an evolved young woman. I had direction, conviction, and confidence. I was reborn, and I knew what I had to do in my life. It was true, Iam had shown me a new way of life and it was real and sincere.

Alan and I drifted into each other’s arms and stared long and hard into each other’s eyes. It was as if it was the first time we’d noticed each other fully. I’d cared for him all along and vice versa. He was always generous and there for me. He was polite; he would kiss my mother on the forehead and shake my father’s hand. Iam was right, Alan was a good man. We collided with each other and it was a long time coming. Before we were amateurs and now we nurtured one another.

The next morning, I woke him with breakfast cooking in the kitchen. He stumbled in, and we kissed and had breakfast with laughs. He opted to walk Jax while I got ready for work. I put on a dress that hugged my figure nicely, and a dark red color ran over my lips. We left the apartment together. My energy had changed, and everyone recognized it at work. I was back, and I was better than ever. I was a more refined woman. I had felt sorry for myself long enough, and I was conscious of I what I had this time. I tied my hair in a bun, and I got to work… I had to find Iam.

I began my search again for more information, narrowing it down from the CIA to Project Benevolence and Precinct Ground Zero. I looked at the photograph of my father, Amir Patel, next to my desk and remembered years ago that he had written his own section of an interview with the famous developer scientist, Dr. James O’Donnell. My father posed for a photo with the Scientist which I found on the internet. The Scientist was born in the year 2001 and we shared a birthday. Dr. O’Donnell excelled past his peers significantly in academics and earned himself early enrollment with a full scholarship to M.I.T. at the age of fifteen years old. Almost twenty years later, he would aid the United States and allies to a victory in the world’s first Nuclear War by producing mass destructive humanoid soldiers fresh out of their Beta phase.

Still, it did not bring me closer to finding out where Iam could be or be going. I sat back in my seat and thought about what more I could do as Alan arrived in my cubicle. I turned to greet him, and he kissed me. I smiled, “I think I should talk with your father again.”

# Chapter 11

An elderly woman with large-rim glasses placed a warm wet towel on my forehead, springing my eyes open to her touch. She smiled at me as I regained consciousness. Her wrinkled skin piled over her frail structure, and her presence felt unfamiliar. Many memories returned but she was not part of them.

“Oh, young man, you’re awake!” An old man croaked in my peripheral.

I flinched at being called a young man since I had been through a lifetime it felt. I rose from the cot they placed me on in the back of their gift shop. “I’m fine, thank you very much.” I took the warm towel from the elderly woman, and she continued to wear a smile for me.

“This is my wife, Teresa, and my name’s Earnest.” The moment the old man, Earnest, reached out his hand, I accepted. “Iam.” Earnest smiled, similar to the smile of his wife, Teresa. “We know who you are, and we’re glad you’re here.” I looked at Teresa, who now had a tear in her eye. “She can’t speak anymore, but she recognized you as soon as you fell through our door. How did you find us? This can’t be a mere coincidence! Please, come and tell at the table. Teresa made soup.”

I smiled and helped Teresa from her seat. They led me to a quaint dining room with a wooden table in the center. Teresa brought the bowls and silverware to the table from the kitchen, and Earnest brought the pot of soup. He pulled the chair out for Teresa to sit in the center. She pointed for me to sit at the head of the table, and Earnest took his seat as well at the opposite end. The soup was delicious and a warm reminder of home with my mother, father, and brother Cain. I felt my strength returning. I was grateful to sit at a table and feel camaraderie. “Thank you,” I said.

“Actually, we would like to thank you.” Earnest nodded proudly.

“What can you thank me for?” I asked because although I saw Ernest during my meditation, I had no recollection of him either.

Earnest looked at his wife, and she stood from her seat and went into another room. “We used to have a farm before the war. We would work at it, just the two of us and Joe.” Teresa returned to the table with a physical photograph of a young man bearing a decapitated arm replaced with a mechanical one. He stood with his good arm around the shoulders of a younger *me.*

“I remember him,” I looked up from the photo as Teresa retook her seat. The tears that she held back had finally fallen. When I touched her hands, her eyes widened, and I could tell that I was helping. I smiled at the photo reminiscing on the mission I was on when I met Joe, *Wilman,* was the last name.

“You’ll have to excuse Teresa for staring, but it is a miracle that you are here. You may not know, but you see, Joe’s our grandson. We raised him ourselves when his parents died young. He was all we had, and we sure missed him when he moved away from the farm to join the war. He was only sixteen when he enlisted, and eighteen when that accident he had exposed him to the cosmic radiation that consumed his arm and left a growing tumor in his chest. We got news of his hospitalization and had to sell our farm to help pay for the surgery and recovery since the Air Force wouldn’t cover it all. Still, it wasn’t enough because he needed a bone marrow transplant, and we got word that the same young man who saved Joe from falling out of his plane was the same young man who’d be the donor. You shook our world, Iam.” Teresa reached for her husband, and we all held hands. “We never got to thank you. Joe sent us this photo years ago and told us to always keep it because you… you’re an angel.” I bowed my head. “Let us repay you.”

I lifted my head, “Please, no repayment is necessary.”

Teresa and Earnest smiled again, “Joe is a very wealthy man now, and he takes good care of us. Though you can’t tell by how we choose to live, you see, Teresa and I are stubborn folk. Joe bought us a lake house some ways north, but we always stay here to run our gift shop. It gives us something to do and good riddance because who knew you would walk through our door? It is our duty to help you now. I only wish you arrived months before, but it is a miracle that you found us at all. Joe has been searching for you.”

“He has?” I was confused. I had no contact with their grandson since I was nineteen years old.

“It’s true and how serendipitous that recently Joe was in Guyana, and had come across a mother and child unexpectedly in a vegetable garden. When he saw the boy, he knew immediately that he must be the son of Iam.” I rose from the table in disbelief. I was almost out the door, but Teresa kept hold of my hand. “Wait a second there-”

“Where are they now? It’s imperative that I find them.” I could feel my heartbeat pick up the pace.

“We already made the call, young man,” Earnest stood from his seat now. He came before me, and Teresa stood behind him, “After much discussion, Joe was able to gain the trust of Iyla when we showed her the photo of you and him all those years ago. We were at the lake house when Joe brought your family there. Your wife, Iyla, is a sweetheart. She says you have yet to meet your son.” He frowned.

I nodded my head in guilt.

“That poor boy. Joe went away again for work and to help find you. We thought it best to let your family rest there at the lake house until Joe came back with help. But you found us, somehow, thank the heavens. Joe bought us another gift, and we don’t use it too often because we’re old.” Behind me, I heard the sounds of a hover jet landing outside in front of the gift shop. “Oh, he’s here already!”

My heart pounded through my chest as the elderly couple led me from their home to the front of the store. A six-seater hover jet awaited us, and a lone pilot stood outside with a salute. I turned to the elderly couple who held onto each other.

“We’re glad to be able to help you this time. Your family’s safe and they await you,” Earnest said.

It felt all too surreal, and yet I was filled with gratitude. I trusted my intuition and it led me exactly where I needed to go, “I don’t know what to say. Thank you, thank you so much!”

“We can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for Joe, for all of us.” Earnest waved.

Teresa broke away from her husband. She came and placed her head on my chest, over my heart. She then looked up and smiled, “Go with my thanks and my blessing, child of the Universe.” She spoke for the first time that afternoon and then went back to her husband.

I accepted their pardoning and Earnest handed me my belongings as I was on my way. I sat on the jet, and within minutes, the pilot lifted us from the ground. At last, I was on my way to my family.

During my periods of solitude as a child, I would feel that something was missing, and it was my father. I was never angry at him for his absence, I was more so concerned with my mother. Now that I was old enough to reflect, she looked lonesome at times. She would smile at Cain and me, but her love was far away. I thought about Iyla in this regard; she was far away from me and her firstborn. I was eager to make up for the lost time. I was alone and confused for so long with nowhere to go as well. I didn’t know where my home was, and now, with the help of friends I’ve made through the years, I would be reunited with my family.

I was fortunate to have found Earnest and Teresa when I did. When I donated bone marrow to their grandson years ago, I didn’t expect to be compensated in this regard. A good deed for an unexpected return. I was often referred to as a hero, and though I may have helped thousands of people, thousands of people have probably helped me as well.

I thought about how worried Iyla must have been. It had been over two years since I last saw her. Since discovering Yarah was still with Cain, Iyla must not have seen her firstborn in the same amount of years. On top of that, Iyla was running away from powerful people with our second and more delicate child. I knew she was highly intelligent and courageous, but how hard life must have been for her. When we were younger, we didn’t think of danger and some day of having children or being separated. I wished that I had been more careful. I knew what I had to do now.

I looked across the spacious aircraft at the empty seats. I closed my eyes and imagined the seats filled with those I love. I smiled because we would all be together, something I’ve only experienced in dreams. I imagined Iyla and our children; Cain and his family; and the Scientist and Mary, who became family, sitting with me. My mother and father would join us in spirit.

The aircraft began to descend and I looked out of the window. We were flying over scraps of land in the Midwest, and I could almost feel Iyla near. My heart was racing and I took a deep breath to calm down. The hover jet landed in an isolated area of a private domestic airport. Three other jets were in circulation when the pilot unlocked the aircraft for me to exit. I took my belongings and breathed in the fresh air of the lake village. It was peaceful here, and I was happy that my wife and son were able to rest and recover in such a tranquil place. I walked down the flight of steps and felt my heartbeat increase again as the pilot gave me his business card so that I could fly whenever I needed. I knew exactly where to go.

I took a bus to the opposite side of the town to get to the vacation lake house. It was some ways from the village, and the anticipation of seeing Iyla again grew more and more. I wondered how she would react. I wondered if she’d be happy and kind and understanding as she so often was. I understood the position she was in, but, I felt the happiest I had been in a long while because I would see her.

I exited the bus and arrived in a desolate neighborhood at a dead-end street. Each home was neatly placed on the block with adequate space between them. The weather was brisk from early morning rain, and the inhabitants of the neighborhood thrived in harmony. I was fixated on the last house where the street ended. I knew before I saw the address that that was where I belonged. It was alluring and inviting. I felt like running and busting down the door and picking them up in my arms. I had never met my son before, and I wished my daughter Yarah was here too.

The windows on either side of the green door were sealed by wooden blinds. There was no mat at the door with a welcoming message but the wind blew behind me, pushing me forward out of my hesitation. I ascended the stairs of the lake house and took another deep breath before lifting my hand to announce my arrival at the front door. My senses went blank, and memories of Iyla’s laugh and her smile played in my mind and then also her grief. The wind blew again, and the sun sprouted through a cloud behind me. I turned around to take in the humbleness I felt, and the door opened behind me as I did. I turned from the sun, and there she stood in the doorway, my true love.

“Iam?” She had sun-kissed skin and bright eyes that looked torn between disbelief and relief. We stared into each other, and it was familiar. Another meeting between the divine masculine and divine feminine. She backed away from the door, shaking her head. The door closed behind me, and I took Iyla into my arms. She tried to resist but soon she surrendered. She wept and smiled, and wept. My life flashed before me as we embraced. I remembered how we first met at Precinct Ground Zero and the last time I held her hand. I remembered how resilient she was and passionate. I remembered small things, the paintings she loved and films we’d watch. She introduced me to a normal life. I remembered her teaching me to cook, wash dishes, and do laundry. I remembered her running into the sun on a beach and how I promised her that I would always come home. Her smile faded away, and she cried more as I rested her on my chest. After some time, she led me to a sofa in the living room of the lake house, and we sat, hand in hand. She kissed me and at long last, I felt that I was home. My heart was at home.

“What is happening in your mind?” I asked as more tears ran down her face.

“It’s just that,” she croaked and cleared her throat. “He looks so much like you.” She smiled through her tears. “I didn’t think how much he would resemble you and his heart-” She trailed off again. She had been through a great deal of pain and fear the last couple of years. It would take her a little time to feel her ambitions have paid off. She filled me in on what I’ve missed and her struggle to find refuge, “My father had to go away because he was summoned for work, and I went through the remainder of my pregnancy alone. You had gone missing, and I could not get in contact with Cain or Mary. I did not know where Yarah was and eventually, I lost communication with my father altogether. I was afraid, but for the baby’s sake, I stayed put as long as I could. I prepared to give birth at home, but when it was time, he would not come out. The midwife had to take me to a hospital because it had been too much time. They performed a Cesarean section because the umbilical cord was tied around his neck. After the procedure, they wouldn’t let me see my baby, our baby boy, because they discovered it before I did. It didn’t happen with Yarah, so I didn’t think it possible that our son would be…” She touched my chest, “… just like you.”

She explained how the doctors discovered the placement of the Boy’s heart, and it took her days to finally be allowed to see him. She told me how she got in contact with Mary after drastic attempts, and was who coerced Cain to help her and the baby in Madagascar. Cain brought medicine for the Boy. He showed them kindness, but he warned Iyla that his help could only be temporary. He shared with her that he adopted Yarah. He thought she was safer that way because the Scientist found out about the Boy’s existence and would surely come to retrieve him. The Scientist had no interest in Yarah due to the placement of her heart but was marveled by the Boy and labeled him the first natural born of Project Benevolence. He crowned the Boy invaluable. Iyla had nowhere to run and so she awaited Dr. O’Donnell’s visit to Madagascar himself. He was able to confiscate the Boy from the helms of the local government and convinced Iyla that they return to the lab at the Precinct. Iyla’s back was against the wall because she could not allay the Boy of the complications he experienced after birth. Dr. O’Donnell promised to help and that he would reunite her with me. She learned quickly that it was a lie.

“I felt I had to take him away because the Scientist had a new agenda. It was dangerous and difficult, but I had help, and I managed to escape with our baby down to Guyana. I thought at least I would reconnect with my father, but alas, I could not. He was still employed by the Scientist who would’ve found out and taken us back to the facility. I started to give up hope because I could not speak with anyone, and our baby was dying. I managed just fine, but my abilities were limited. I tried to imitate the remedy the Scientist administered, but it was just that, an imitation, and I did not want to experiment on our son. He’s a happy child, but he is in pain. The dextrocardia condition is rare as it is and he had trouble breathing on his own initially. The Scientist performed surgery and replaced his natural-born heart with an engineered one similar to yours but more advanced. He promised it would make him better and healthier, but it seemed to only make him more sick. Maybe it was my fault for taking him away too soon while he was healing, but I can’t trust the Scientist. I am glad you are here because I had been so lost. Once we met Joe Wilman by happenstance, it made me believe again that we would find you. The Wilman’s have been generous; we’ve been here for months awaiting the day Joe would find you and bring you here,” she croaked again. “I suspect, however, that Joe works for the Scientist as well, but for some reason, he hasn’t delivered us to him yet. We have to do something, Iam. Our son is only two and a half years old and is easily fatigued. He sleeps most of the time and can barely sustain a breath. I try everything, but he needs more than I can provide. I have nowhere else to go and he does not have much strength or time left. He needs help, and I refuse to take him back to Dr. O’Donnell.”

I held her, everything she said made sense, even the part about Joe possibly working for the Scientist. But maybe because I met Ernest and Teresa, I did not worry. “Take me to our son.”

Iyla led me into a large bedroom filled with fresh lavenders and lilies. The walls too were decorated with portraits of flowers and plants, except for one containing the glass door leading to a terrace that overlooked the backyard and lake. A large bed adorned with green bed curtains rested in the center of the room below the chandelier, illuminating sunlight over the sleeping Boy. He lay underneath blankets and pillows, and he was the most peaceful entity I had ever seen. He was the reason I was still alive, the reason I had a purpose. The Boy slept with a smile on his face, and Iyla held my hand as she perceived that I was a bit nervous about meeting my son for the first time.

“It just occurred to me that you must not know his name,” She gently nudged me forward to the bed and I stood over him as he began to stir. “His name is Gesu.”

The Boy sat up erect in bed, scratching his back in the cutest manner. Iyla sat on the bed with him and kissed his brow, but Gesu only returned a stare at me. I sat down and felt our hearts aligning at the moment. For the time being, I was the remedy to the Boy’s pain. He took my face between his hands and looked at me as if he could see within. He wiped tears from my eyes before they could fall over the smile I wore. It was true, he resembled me very much.

“Gesu, I would like you to meet your father,” Iyla hugged him from behind, and then he smiled. She drew me in, and for the first time, Gesu had the love of both of his parents simultaneously. “You can call him papa.”

“Papa?” Gesu spoke, and I kissed my wife and son, thanking the Universe for the incredible moment in time. We suffered enough separation. I was amazed and glad to be in their lives again with open arms. The Boy wanted to break out of the sandwich his mother and I placed him in, and he let himself down from the bed. But before he ventured off, he took my hand in his and led me through the glass door and to the lake in the backyard. I obeyed every command, unable to remove the serene smile on my face.

Near the lake, Gesu found toys of his and I played with him. Iyla joined us, and we cried and laughed like people experiencing true love for the first time. We missed Yarah and meant to bring her to this feeling as well because, at last, we were home.

# Chapter 12

The doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of a family tradition commemorating success. The lights dimmed and music began contributing to the ambiance of the nostalgia I anticipated in my quaint office. My most loyal assistant entered with a silver platter in hand. After setting utensils in their respective positions on my desk before me, she placed her rendition of the special meal my mother would cook for me on celebratory occasions; mashed potatoes, asparagus, and a rare 7 oz. horse steak. It turned midnight, it was officially my birthday and I was glad to begin with a Malbec and my favorite dish because it meant good tidings. My mother instilled this in me and it was the reason she was my favorite. She was a songstress in a choir and people would describe her as a person whose heart was always in the right place.

I cut into the steak the way my father taught me when we would sit across from one another at our small kitchen table years ago. He was a man of few words whose appearance eluded his wits and talent. My mother and I couldn’t help but watch him because he was a compulsive creator; a Mirror-Maker who made his fortune when I turned ten years old. We moved out of the ranch we resided in Fort Scott, Kansas, into a Victorian home in New England, Massachusetts. My mother and I became even more secondary to my father’s craft.

My mother focused on me instead and promoted my genius. She wanted me to go to the best schools and hone my intellect. I vowed I would be who she hoped for and more. I excelled academically just to make her happy, but the older I got, she sang less and less around the house. I learned that it was because of my father.

He created and designed extravagant mirrors just to stand in front of one all day. He owned his own factory by the time I got to junior high. At our new house, he created a five-cylinder office for himself, and each wall, ceiling, and floor reflected the subjects in the room. He rarely left the mirrored office and sometimes wouldn’t notice that I was in the room. I would sneak in to spy on what he was doing and I’d find him creating all types of objects; my particular favorite being a glass-mirrored dagger. I once asked my father if he was a hero or a villain while standing in front of a mirror together, and he replied, ‘What’s the difference.’ There was no question, in fact, he never asked questions. I stared at my reflection, and his, and I saw how I did not favor my father at all. He was simply a narcissist, and I would be better than him.

One day he died in the same room. My mother wasn’t home, and I stood over him lying on the floor, blood sprouting from a wound in his chest. It was my first time seeing a human heart up close. The glass dagger pierced delicately through my his heart, standing erect in the wound, and I couldn’t decide if it was intentional or a mistake. I would keep the dagger forever as part of my endowment and memorabilia.

When my mother found me in the office, she screamed and pulled me away from my father’s corpse. She cried profusely but I did not. I found it meaningless to grieve because my father told me a long time ago that all matter returns to its origin in this world. Life was about leaving a legacy. He created many things as he pursued fulfillment, but he failed to realize that I was his greatest legacy.

I felt entitled to my vision of a better world. I was not a doctor of destruction the way I was famed to be. Rather I was a doctor of life. I knew that in order to see my vision through, I would have to do what any great man’s done in his life; I had to fight for what I believed in. I no longer had friends or family to rely on, even my dear Aunt Mary, had become disappointed with me. But I had a knack for trusting my own judgement.

My plan for the future was a tough concept for many to fully grasp, but from what I’d seen while leading the first nuclear war in history was that I knew better than most. I was chosen to hold the world in my hands for a reason.

I bit into the last bit of my steak, and my assistant poured me a glass of Moscato. This was only the beginning of the festivities. Larger events were on the horizon.

Iam’s wife had taken advantage of my kindness and stalled my plans long enough. I was aware of the forces devoted to Iam and his cause but he could not stop me. I was informed of the success in finding Iam’s family, and it was divine timing. Time I no longer had to remain patient. My enemy was closing in, and they had no plans of changing course. I was ready for the fight.

I was wary of delays and spies, but so far, my plan was unfolding perfecting. Iam would obey in hopes that I would help his son, but I could no longer depend on him for war. Ever since he fell into the hands of Iyla years ago, he had become less reliable. Inevitably I had to manipulate him like an instrument to my will. I punished him maybe a bit harshly but I was disappointed. I’d had his memory erased insidiously, and this time, it took him nearly two years to even remember who he was. I considered how much he possibly kept from me through the years and if he was plotting against me. He spent the last two years in South Asia relearning cognitive capabilities that I stripped away from him. I was angry with his indiscretion and for abandoning his fiduciary duties. He posed a substantial threat, especially when he discovered details of my secret invasion. His influence was spreading, and I had to keep him under my thumb because he could prove to be an adversary. He was learning to tap into his limitless potential and he never ceased to amaze me. His self-sustainability was flawless, and I found it almost enjoyable to watch him overcome many obstacles in his way. I still had hope in him after all and I would give him one more chance to decide what side he wanted to be on. But I had greater faith in his son.

Gesu was to be delivered, my true, benevolent one. Iam was fascinating, but he was only the epoch of my brilliance. Gesu would become the leader I’ll steer in the new world; the world where Benevolent humans walk freely, without fear and discrimination. And free of the toxins produced by the previous, expired species of homo sapiens. The age of annihilation was nigh.

# Part Two

# Chapter 13

Something was out of balance. I rose from the bed where my wife and son slept in the middle of the night and stepped out of the door leading to the lake in the backyard. It felt to me as if the ground was shaking, but only I could feel it. It was not a pain or a sound but a slight turbulence that made me conclude that something was not in sync. I sat in the grass and into a deep meditation. The creatures of the night carried on as usual, the wind blew gently over the lake, and I could detect no other lifeforms in my immediate vicinity. Suddenly, I heard the buzzing of a fly nearby, and it made me open my eyes. It was a peculiar fly; it flew away from sources of light and the oscillation of its wings sounded mechanical and unnatural. We were being watched. The Scientist was watching and knew where we were. Iyla could be right that maybe Joe was involved. I decided if the Scientist were to come then I would await his arrival. I no longer feared Dr. O’Donnell. I closed my eyes and the fly buzzed away.

I remained in meditation for another hour or so, until I was disturbed by screams coming from Iyla. “Iam,” she cried. “Iam, please help him!” I opened my eyes, sprung from the grass, and ran back into the bedroom to find Iyla kneeling on the mattress with Gesu in her arms, unconscious.

I went beside and took the Boy into my arms; his breathing and heart rate had slowed drastically. His mother was panicked, but I remained calm. I took a deep breath and touched Gesu’s heart with my hand. Within seconds, his heart began to pick up pace. After a couple of minutes of me connecting with his heart, it returned to normal, and so did his breathing. His mother calmed down, “Iam, you have to be with him at all times. Please.” I wiped her tears, and we lay in bed together again, wrapped in each other’s arms. Another fleeting moment of peace.

“I have a plan to help Gesu.”

Iyla sighed as if she knew what I was going to say, “Iam, look at your creation here; if the world is to end today or even tomorrow, all that would matter is that we’re together.”

“You’re right, but you may have also realized by now that the Scientist is coming.” I said.

“What, he is?” She panicked and sat up in the bed.

“It’s okay, we’re going to help our son, and we have to help as many others as we can because no one knows what’s to come. It’s time I stand up to the Scientist once and for all.” I brushed hair from falling over her brow.

“There has to be another way. There is no help for us in that godforsaken facility! He’ll attack us, steal Gesu, and erase your memory again.” She pleaded and reminded me what had happened before with our firstborn, Yarah. She wept, and I understood her pain. I held her tight.

“If I do nothing, innocent people will die, our son and daughter included. No one’s safe, not even us. This is the better decision for a better outcome now that I know who I am.” Gesu smiled at the both of us with open eyes briefly before fading back to sleep. It lightened the mood between Iyla and I because we couldn’t help to smile.

“I trust you,” she said and we hung out in bed a little longer. But we couldn’t stay even if we wanted to. Gesu’s importance was obvious, and I’d helped the Scientist do too much. I was as much responsible for the pending war as Dr. O’Donnell. I had been an agent of good, but now that most of my memories were returned, I remembered things I was not proud of. I had never said aloud the wrong I’d done in my life. Sometimes, I would choose the path of least resistance and ignore my own judgement. I had been lost but things were different now.

I watched Iyla and Gesu beside me, and I felt I succeeded already. We had been together 24 hours, and I had greater strength in mind and spirit. This reunion with my family brought me greater clarity, and a complete renewal of senses. I had everything I needed in order to overcome the Scientist’s wrath.

With the existence of Gesu, Dr. O’Donnell knew his plan for world domination could be realized. The Scientist was furious with the government’s verdict of the Benevolent citizens, and he predicted that would be the case. They’d call his actions treason, and he called their planned genocide an act against humanity. After all, the Project Benevolent people were indeed human even though classified as engineered. They were red-blooded beings with the will to live.

To tell my wife all the extremities I’d have to go in the coming hours would frighten her more than the reality that our son needed the Scientist’s expertise. I kept some thoughts to myself, and we lay in bed for as long as possible. When Gesu woke officially, he wanted to play. We were happy that even though his energy was tainted, he still had the prowess of a toddler. We got up, and I played with him around the lake while Iyla prepared essentials for our departure.

The Scientist called on my smartphone, and I knew it was time to go. “Have you found the Boy?” He asked even though he already knew the answer. “I think it’s time you brought him home.”

“He is already home.” Gesu chased a firefly as the sun rose behind him. “However a deal’s a deal, Dr. O’Donnell, I’ll bring him to you, and you call off your war.”

“And then do what, Iam, let them destroy my life’s work?”

“There’s another way.”

“No, there is no other way, there’s only your way.” He argued.

“Your way involves millions of deaths…”

“And your way involves heavily depending on the kindness of the United States of America. Don’t quit your day job, my boy!” He yelled through the receiver. “Leave the ideas to me. Bring the Boy, and we can work something out.” He ended the call before I could respond.

I watched Gesu going too far into the lake while chasing the firefly. I went after him just as a hover jet descended down above us. I held onto Gesu and saw the pilot from before now in the co-pilot seat of the cockpit and Joe Wilman flying the aircraft. He looked down at me as Iyla joined my side. The look on his face was serious unlike the expression of his grandparents, Earnest and Teresa. It suggested to me that it was true, he was working with the Scientist. Whatever Joe’s position was in this scenario, I would have to trust him because thus far, my family had been safe.

“Heard you needed a ride.” He then smiled, “Come on, you saved my life before, didn’t you?” Joe saluted me with his mechanical arm as Gesu wrapped his arms around my neck.

“Pa-pa, plane!” He was a child of few words, and it added to the abundance of hope I felt at that moment. For the first time in my life, I understood that I was never alone in this world.

Iyla and Gesu clung to me on the aircraft. She forced a smile, but I could tell that she was weary. She whispered to me so that the Boy could not hear, “I think there’s something you must know.”

“What is it?” I looked her in the eye.

“I know that our son is important to the Scientist, but there’s another reason he’s obsessed. Before escaping the facility, I heard rumors that the Scientist placed something in Gesu’s heart. It is supposed to be a device or some other intoxicant that I believe to be the source of our son’s pain. I thought there’s no way Dr. O’Donnell would do something of the sort, but…”

I put my arm around her, “Everything’s going to be okay.” Gesu fell asleep again against my chest, holding his mother’s hand close to his. Iyla may have heard correctly; there was something in the Boy’s heart that made him sick, and it was explosive.

# Chapter 14

I woke to the clock reading 12:34 am I was officially 25 years old. I got out of bed and stood in the mirror. My dreams were heavy and I was worried. The world was not the same. I was curious about the future Cain and Iam described to me. If we were heading into another war, our living conditions would drastically change. All livelihood would suffer, and rationing and privation would ensue. Since I was born just when the first war was over, I was unaffected by the dire consequences and the immediate aftermath. There was a global famine, and the world population dropped by 14% in those three years of human obliteration until China surrendered its assault in the San Francisco bay. Russia and North Korea would follow the trend.

As a small girl, we traveled to the west coast sometimes and saw neighborhoods under reconstruction. Murals and memorials honoring many who perished decorated the ruins. Some of the works were credited to my father; his publications sparked hope in the midst of despair. We were proud of him for serving as a light in the world during dark days. I figured I would have to do the same if Iam’s claims were true.

I washed my face and returned to bed. I was happy to find the males of my home, Alan and Jax, resting still but I could not sleep anymore. I was determined to get in contact with Iam. I spoke with Roy recently and urged him to tell me more about his quest to meet Iam. All the same as me in my brief comparison, finding Iam seemed like a dead-end road. He was a bio-engineered soldier from an unsanctioned organization funded by the CIA. He was not meant to be found.

It was a beautiful day, and it was the last warm day. I went to have lunch in the park alone since I had a lot on my mind. The journalist who got to cover the 25th anniversary of Red Flag Day in my absence was celebrated in the office. Though I was happy for him, I wanted time to myself. Celebrations were forming all around. Michigan Avenue was closed due to the preparation of the Red Flag Day Parade. I sat in Grant Park enjoying sushi from the takeaway restaurant next door to my building and watched the workers construct stages, wires, sets, etc., for the parade. I ate my lunch peacefully until someone caught my eye. I felt so silly to have almost forgotten about the blind woman the day I met Iam. Mary was sitting alone, feeding the birds and squirrels leftovers from her meal. I finished my lunch and gathered myself to greet her.

I stood beside the bench Mary occupied and cleared my throat to warn her of my presence, “Hello, hi.” I smiled, and Mary turned her attention toward my voice.

“Hey there,” She nodded as the sunlight penetrated her eyes. She could not see me, but I could tell that she knew who I was.

“May I sit with you?” She smiled and granted me space beside her. I didn’t know exactly what to say, but I knew that the universe led me here for a reason, “You must get this a lot, but can you see me?” I asked bashfully.

“I can see figures, but unfortunately, I can no longer make out faces. However, my hearing is more acute than ever.” She said, at peace with her reality.

“How are you today?” I asked sincerely.

“I am feeling a bit anxious, but there is no use in worrying about anything,” Mary said as she tossed more food to the birds. “I come here to relax my mind with nature because some humans can be draining.” She smiled, “Thank you for asking. What brings you here?”

“I came to have lunch with myself and watch the setup of the parade,” I said. “And to relax my mind, I guess.”

She nodded her head, “What is your name?”

I reached out my hand, “Oh right, I’m Alissa Patel,” she accepted my hand. “We’ve never formally met, but I take it that you’re Mary.”

The energy seemed to shift along with her smile. “Nice to meet you, Alissa.” She rose from her seat and released my hand as she did. She walked some yards away before I called after her.

“Wait!” I stood from the seat now.

“I’m sorry young lady, I have a previous engagement.” Mary continued on, and I didn’t know what to do. I had been searching for weeks for anything to confirm the locations of Iam and Precinct Ground Zero, and here was Mary, a direct link.

“Do you have any idea where Iam is?” I spurted out. “Is he really from a program called ‘Project Benevolence?’ I’d do anything to know where he is.” And this got Mary to stop in her tracks.

She turned back to me and stared, “My dear, I’m sorry I cannot be much help. You mustn’t worry though, you seem to be the type of person who is always at the right place, at the right time.”

*What did she mean?* I watched her walk out of view, and I fought feelings of chasing her down like a madwoman for more answers. I stayed put and formulated a new perspective. Iam mentioned stopping the Scientist who had become, simply put, a terrorist. Dr. O’Donnell was the brains behind the outrage. Though he was responsible for our country’s victory twenty-five years ago, he would be the one responsible for the world’s downfall as well. It still puzzled me how one man could create a war. Though he was no common man with access to a fortune, indispensable android soldiers, and artificial warfare, it didn’t make him a worthy enough contender in my mind.

Mary’s role was unclear in the whole matter, but Iam called her a friend. I had a feeling that she knew more than she let on. I wanted to scream and run to the police or someone for help, but even if I was to expose the truth about the Scientist, who would believe me? Unless I could discover exactly how he would begin another war, I was helpless. It must have been the same reason Iam hadn’t reached out for help to stop him either, and it wasn’t that the Scientist was invincible. I wished Iam didn’t lose his memories and was able to tell me exactly what was going on, but he was left in the dark, and then so was I.

I thought to find Iam a different way. I decided to find him the way he’d find his loved ones. Instead of returning to work punctually, I sat alone for hours in the park. I focused on Iam and sent him good thoughts wherever he was.

This was difficult for me because I had never focused my mind so intensely, but I was determined. I learned that when there’s a will, there’s a way. At some point during my meditation, I cried. My intentions for finding Iam were pure and free of selfish desires; I wanted to help. He was a good man who suffered a lot in his life. I didn’t understand before why Iam showed me his family and the world he came from. I didn’t understand how his existence was possible, and now I was behaving in a new light. I had been greatly affected and I learned how to love not only another person, but ultimately myself. I was no longer a pretentious journalist and romantic with a plethora of external motivations. Iam showed me the light within. I thought then that he would succeed or already had because of the light he carried inside. I imagined him finding his family again, being with his wife and son and possibly his daughter Yarah too. I imagined that he had already stopped the Scientist while saving the Benevolent citizens. It made me smile to think about it.

My phone buzzed for the seventh time and I gave in. I broke out of the meditation and saw a call from a restricted number to which I readily answered. The voice coming through the receiver brought tears of joy in my eyes. I was humbled again as the voice breathed, “Alissa, happy birthday.” I was at a loss for words. It was as if electricity surged my body but I knew my mind was not deceiving me. It was who I thought it was. “Listen, we cannot stay on the phone for too long.”

“Iam?” I finally gathered the strength to speak with him. “You’re well!”

“They tried to erase my memories again, but I’ve overcome it. I wanted to call you sooner… I wish I had better news, but I’m afraid the Scientist could be ready to pull the trigger.”

“What?”

“Meet me on location. I’ll send you the coordinates for our rendezvous. Thank you Alissa for your help.” The call ended.

My anxiety returned mixed with excitement. I looked around me to ensure my safety, I did not want to be paranoid, but I understood that the second war had already been put in place. I chose not to stress about what was to come and instead prepared myself to meet Iam wherever he needed me to go.

I looked through my phone and saw that I had two missed calls from Alan, so I called him back. He wanted to take me to dinner with my parents for my birthday, but I asked him instead to meet me at my place. He agreed and ended the call, and then I called his father, Roy, who had just got done with a pilot session and was eager to hear about my progress in the search for Iam. He agreed to meet at my apartment as well. I rushed home and walked Jax. I planned to take him with us. I called my parents and postponed my birthday dinner for another day since I had a story to cover. They smiled and accepted the change of plans. I showered and kept Jax near me as I always did, but this day was different. I knew that my life was about to change again, and this time I would be, at the least, mentally prepared. I sat in my apartment and awaited what was to come next.

Alan was the first to arrive. I sat him on the sofa and explained to him Iam’s call to me. He was a little apprehensive, “I just can’t believe this talk of another war. I mean, we went through so much as a human race before, how could the world afford to go through it again?”

“I don’t know, but it’s best not to out rule any possibilities of human willpower.” I received a message on my smartphone that Roy had arrived. He came through the door prepared with a bag and a gun.

“A wise man once said, ‘I rather be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.’” He quoted an ancient philosopher from the last millennia. His presence solidified the dynamic of the situation.

I was glad to be with a veteran. Lives could be lost and a fight could surely ensue. I put in the coordinates that I received from a private number. It looked like Iam wanted me to meet him southwest of here at the border between Iowa and Illinois in a place where the internet was unsure of its exact population. I presumed that these coordinates were where the Ground Zero facility was located on an island in the Mississippi River: Rush Island. I realized it was near where Alan picked me up after being in custody with Cain in Southern Illinois. It would be a four-hour drive, and I only hoped we had time to aid Iam efficiently.

“There are many roles for those involved in war, and there are many ways for a person to become a soldier.”

“I don’t understand what you’re so gung-ho about, dad.” Alan argued, “This isn’t some scheme for you to relive your glory days.”

“It’s greater than that. If I can be of assistance to stop another war, I’d risk my life with honor. Just as I vowed to do when I was your age.” Roy stood up to him.

“What about mom?” Alan shook his head.

“Alan, if there is a way that we can prevent the war from kicking off, we must take that route. You have to understand what I’ve seen… what we’ve seen… I’m already involved and must do all I can to help. I did not understand the gravity of innovation and global dominance until Iam and his brother Cain explained to me the possibility of an off-radar society of human beings living in an underground facility. The Scientist, Dr. O’Donnell, is powerful, why would he not retaliate? He has everything he needs to put up an offense. There’s no limit to his might and we had better take these reports seriously. I’m with Roy and Iam. If there is a way to stop both accounts of violence, I’m willing to risk my life for it too.”

“Why? For all I know, this Iam guy could be some lunatic filling your heads with propaganda. I mean, it’s your birthday, for chrissakes, and you want me to drive you to him. I’m sure he is as great as you both say, but let’s get on with the truth here, you really love *him*, don’t you?” It was more of an accusation than a question.

I overlooked the possibility of Alan comparing himself to Iam, but Alan was a young man experiencing life for the first time along with me. I loved Iam, he will forever be a dear friend because he encouraged me to realize Alan as my partner.

“Yes, I love Iam,” Alan looked to the floor as I admitted. I raised his chin and smiled at him, “I love Iam, and you will too! He’s a healer and a leader and a family man. He showed me true compassion, and that resulted in me being here today to tell you that I am grateful for you, and I love you. You are the man I choose to have by my side, and so I ask you to always be there. If you want to stay here while your father and I go, I’d understand, and I’ll still love you and want to marry you when I return.”

It was the first time I saw his eyes water, “You want to marry me?” He asked, and I nodded my head… I meant what I said, and he knew it too. “I love you too… so much.” We kissed, and Roy watched and applauded.

We acknowledged him again as he said, “I’m really happy for you kids, but there’s danger at hand.”

“Right,” Alan said. “I’ll drive.”

Roy concluded, “Why drive when we could fly?”

About half an hour later, we boarded Roy’s aircraft and were on our way to meet Iam at long last. Roy allowed Jax in the cock pit with him. Alan and me sat in the cabin of the aircraft and we flew away from home. I thought of Mary and my parents. I thought of Iam’s daughter Yarah and everyone else who would subsequently be affected by the outcome of our actions to follow. I didn’t know what to expect. We held the fate of the world in our hands.

# Chapter 15

I sat with the phone to my ear, “It’s time.” I waited for more, but the call ended.

I got up from the comfort of my seat and went down to my basement where my armory resided. My back turned to the entrance as I filled a bag full of essential equipment I would need for the night. I performed a set of push-ups to get my blood pumping. I kept going until depletion. Back to war. We had been investing in this plan for as long as I could remember. I had become what I became because we have never truly had peace.

“Uncle?” I froze and looked over my shoulder back at Yarah, who had entered without my knowledge. I was in no shape for war if my niece could sneak behind me. I had gotten soft these past few years. I programmed armies of androids to be killers, but when my niece came into the picture, I felt a change in direction. Soon I was the guy placing tea cups and pots on pink tables with my girls. Yarah asked, “What are you doing?”

I rose from the floor and faced her, “Aren’t you supposed to be doing homework?”

She came to me and put her arms around me, “My aunt wants to know if you’re leaving.”

“Yes, I have a job to do. That is how I am able to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads.” I smiled at her, but she frowned.

“Uncle, I feel scared.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid that I’m never going to see you again, just like my papa.”

I knelt down to her level, something that I’d never done before, “Did you have a bad dream?”

“Yes, about the day my papa went away. I wish that I could go with you.” I wiped her tears, and she sniffed. “What if I never see you and my papa again?” She whined.

I was impressed by her articulation. The new generation of children were remarkably intelligent. I remembered having a similar conversation with Iam as children and him kneeling to comfort me. I understood I was missed. Though she called me uncle, I was the only father she had.

My eyes turned red because I could not lie to her. I could lie to many people, but I was not an advocate for raising a child in deception. I was confronted with the thought of her father’s demise long ago. I held her tight because the truth was Iam had become an enemy of the State, and it was something that I could not change. “Yarah.”

“Yes?”

I took her by the shoulders. “I want to invite you to come with me, for this one time only.” Her presence could be a liability, but she would be protected. The Scientist wasn’t going to stop until he was victorious and luckily we were on his side.

# Chapter 16

“We’re about twenty minutes out,” Roy exclaimed from the cockpit. Out of the window below we flew over vacant land masses, parts of Illinois and Iowa that were abandoned and left in ruins from the war. The enemies neared the heart of our country from Canadian trails, and it was evident that we were still healing from it. “Looks like we got company.” Roy pointed to a GPS radar in the cockpit.

“Is it military?” Alan asked.

“They’re transmitting a message,” Roy pushed a button on the panel dashboard. “Come in, dispatch, over.” But no response. He made a second attempt but only received static.

“Dad, don’t you think we should stop here?” Alan asked as three incoming Boeing AH-111 hovercrafts flew toward us at high velocity, but Roy never broke confidence.

“It doesn’t look like they’re in for a fight, but man, they’re fast. I take it they’re an android unit.” The hovercrafts came to a halt forty yards ahead of us. Roy followed their example, and we hovered in place.

“State your case, Captain Roy Macintosh, rank level 3.” A mechanical voice boomed across the sky.

“They can encrypt my ID Tag.” Roy pushed the button on his dashboard again, “We’re visitors, over.”

“That is an invalid response and occasion. You are not authorized to enter this zone. Turn away immediately.”

“Shoot.” Roy spat, but he didn’t give up. “We’re invited guests, over.”

“Captain Roy Macintosh, rank level 3, is not on the guest list for the closing ceremony. This is prompt number two, turn away immediately.”

“Let me try,” I took the dispatch from Roy, “I am here on behalf of the Chicago Sunrise Newspaper with my team Roy and Alan Macintosh. My name is Alissa Patel, and we are here to meet with Doctor James O’Donnell.”

“Access… granted. Follow along.” The mechanical voice ceased.

“It worked!” I exclaimed and Roy followed the hovercrafts through the sky. “Iam must have alerted them of our arrival.”

“Don’t you find that a little strange?” Alan asked and I shrugged.

“It mentioned a ceremony. Did I hear that right?” Roy inquired.

“I heard it too, but Iam didn’t mention anything about that.” I scratched my head. “If the Scientist is complying and closing the facility, then why are there rumors of opposition?”

“It could just be for show,” Roy assured us. “Standby.”

After twenty more miles of flying over the Mississippi River, we reached the vast off-radar island that stretched 80 miles over the river. “Rush Island.” I breathed while overlooking a massive solar-powered structure with a metallic exterior, the size of a few of the largest world coliseums combined. It was sheltered with a glass metal-mirrored ceiling that reflected the sky and everything else above it. The coliseum itself stretched 55 miles north on the river and wide over surrounding land. The facility was four stories high and fairly low to the ground. I conjured to believe that there must be levels for miles underground to fit the soldiers and humans that were manufactured. “This is where Iam is from, this must be Precinct Ground Zero.”

“I thought you said Iam was from Project Benevolence.” Alan stared at the coliseum, awed too.

“Yes, but they reside discreetly in the same facility here.” We followed the hovercrafts settled on the helipad erected from the center of the structure. Roy parked us on the helipad as well in the allotted visitors’ spaces (there were fellow guests with parked aircraft already), and the android welcoming crew greeted us with stiff bows as we exited our hovercraft. They led us into the helipad entrance into the facility’s grand hall and directly to a camouflaged tram that served as an elevator implanted into the walls. It traveled down the vast facility through to the underground. The tram was made of reflective glass mirrors on all sides; one could see their reflection and the quantum details of the interior.

The tram spiraled down past the first level, where vacant combat grounds were found. We descended past the second level, which occupied three stories, and same as the first level, it was empty. The tram picked up its pace, and we passed through Level 5, displaying a naturelesque forest full of live trees and creatures, down past Level 6, containing a massive body of water that resembled an ocean. The tram only displayed six levels on its digital reader, but the tram kept on and came to a complete halt at what I’d learn to be Level 0. I could not see what Level 0 contained since it was dark, and the only light was from solar lamps along a walkway. The lights stretched about thirty yards and only led into more darkness. Jax growled next to me. He seemed to not trust the android who had escorted us thus far. The android looked down at Jax as he growled a little louder. I kept Jax off the harness because he had been adequately trained. If he was to attack anyone or anything, it would be because he was protecting me and my company, but I put a hand on Jax to relax him.

The doors to the tram opened, “Come.” The android stepped off of the tram first and Roy last. We followed the path lit by the small solar lamps as if we were going to see the Wizard of Oz. The walkway ended in front of a massive, dark metal door in which our reflections illumined upon closeness. The door opened with the scan of the android’s pupils, and the center was divided in two. In the middle of the entrance, Cain David awaited us, armed and dressed in a black tuxedo. Behind him was an all-white, solar-lit corridor that looked like a dead end.

“Welcome,” Cain looked at me, and I studied his face. I hesitated but we all entered, save for the escort android in which the massive metal door reattached and closed, leaving it behind. “Try not to move too much,” Cain suggested, and we stayed in place as the corridor shifted in motion away from where we came.

“Where are we going?” I broke the silence.

“We are going to meet the man himself, the Scientist,” Cain responded without looking at me. “Dr. O’Donnell.”

“Is he expecting us? Where is Iam?” I asked, and when he looked my way it made Jax growl. Cain paid him no mind.

“Of course, you’re invited guests after all,” Cain walked past us as the corridor came to a halt. An entrance formed at Cain’s input of numbers in midair. The white walls of the corridor parted, and a detailed semblance of a perfect world revealed itself. Birds flew through the blue ceiling, and the gentle breeze that blew on the level felt natural. The trees and scenery were terrifically green. The Sun had to be artificial solar-powered, however, still very astonishing. It felt warm and welcoming. This level was its own small world; there were three-story buildings and houses, stores, and streets. The inhabitants were populous and jovial, moving about on electric hoverboards and carts. They were indeed human yet mystical…

“The right-hearted people,” Alan labeled them, and he was correct. These people were very similar to Iam in many ways. On this level, there was only humility, mirth, and progress. There were no signs of poverty, stealing, suffering, or falsehood on this massive level. And other than Cain’s attire, there were no signs of a closing ceremony.

A Grand Aquarium stood as tall as the artificial sky and as wide as the entirety of the level miles ahead of us. It was an extraordinary development, and I ventured to guess that the source of water came from the Mississippi River. Though the water seemed to be filtered, it hosted an array of exotic marine species. A group of Benevolent youth tossed a virtual disk around in front of the Aquarium. Their faces were pure and bereft of traditional human angst. It resembled in their behavior as well. They were helpful and uplifting to one another. We had only been walking through the level for a few minutes and already my energy was restored the same way it felt being in Iam’s presence. The Benevolent people projected an abundance of positive energy throughout the space, and I felt a hope for humanity I had never felt before. Everything was peaceful and productive. I noticed a smile on my face, the same on Alan’s and Roy’s faces as well. Jax, too, was infected by the positive auras of the Benevolent citizens. It was no wonder to me, though, why Iam would not want to stay in the facility. It was beautiful and captivating, but it was nonetheless an imitation of life. Iam knew true freedom beyond the realm of the Scientist’s control.

Cain led us toward the Aquarium as androids entered the level behind us, disrupting the peace. They assembled groups of Benevolent people into lines. We stopped to watch what was going on until Cain noticed, “Come with haste.” He punched in a code on the side of the Aquarium glass. Metal lifted the Aquarium ground and a tunnel revealed itself beneath. We followed Cain inside and were able to breath just fine. I peered through the transparent metal ceiling of the tunnel into the Aquamarine and noted the various types of marine creatures; octopus, squid, small fish, big fish, dolphins, sharks, and a few whales. I wondered if they were biologically engineered as well. At the end of the tunnel, we reached yet another elevator behind the Aquarium. We began to ascend for the first time since entering the facility. From the elevator, a long hallway awaited with large wooden doors, and lion-shaped door handles.

Cain knocked three times, and the door opened to a grand hall full of ancient portraits and antiques, along with red curtains and gold rugs that made the place feel royal. A grand staircase sat in the midst of the hall to a second level, where an elderly woman stood at the mouth of the stairs awaiting our arrival. “Mary?” I mouthed to myself, and the elderly woman held on to the rail and descended the stairs. She was dressed in a white gown that she dragged along the steps behind her. Yarah arrived too! She wore a little white dress as well and caught up to hold Mary’s hand as they walked down the stairs together.

Yarah noticed me and rushed down, wrapping her arms around my waist. “Oh, hello!” I smiled down at her, surprised since I hadn’t expected to see her.

“Where’s my papa?” She asked the same question I posed just moments before.

I knelt down to her, “I believe he’s on his way and looking forward to seeing you again. I’d like you to meet my companions here; this is Roy and Alan and my two-year-old puppy, Jax.” Jax licked Yarah, and she laughed.

They played among each other as Mary reached us at the bottom of the stairs, “Alissa Patel… nice to know you again.”

Alan looked at me, “You know her?”

I nodded and stepped forward to take Mary’s hand in mine. Maybe it was she who granted us admittance to the occasion. Her gray eyes loomed over mine, “I wish it was under better circumstances, but alas, chaos is a natural force in this world.” She said and reached to shake the hands of Roy and Alan beside me.

“What circumstance is this? We heard earlier something about a closing ceremony.” Roy asked, and Mary shook her head.

“Yes, the government is on its way to close down Precinct Ground Zero permanently tonight.” A voice from above interrupted. Mary stepped aside, and we all looked up at a frail older man sitting in an electric hover chair. He was wearing a tuxedo, similar in style as Cain’s, and stood from his chair to descend the stairs without holding on to the rail. “You are the friends of Iam I’ve heard so little about, but I recognize you,” the Scientist said to Roy. “Captain Macintosh of the Alaskan brink. I don’t think we had the honor of meeting in person.” The Scientist arrived at the bottom of the stairs and saluted Roy.

“Nice to officially meet you, Dr. O’Donnell.” Roy stretched out a hand, and the Scientist accepted it. “Phenomenal facility you have here.”

The pleasantness fell from the Scientist’s face as he turned to me. “And you must be the journalism duo from the Chicago newspaper. Please, visit a while. You’re just in time for dinner.” The Scientist led us to a dining area behind the staircase. Yarah rode on Jax’s back into the area as the Scientist took a seat at the head of a long soft metaled dining table with water and place settings assigned for each of us. We followed his lead. Alan pulled a seat out for me before he sat, and Cain placed himself at the opposite end of Dr. O’Donnell.

Dr. O’Donnell’s assistant entered and served a plate of bread and butter to us all. The assistant left, and the Scientist addressed me, “You have quite the inquisitive look on your face.” I blushed and thought about the picture the Scientist had taken with my father years ago. I never thought I’d meet someone so influential to modern times.

“I’d like to introduce myself, I’m Alissa and this is my partner, Alan Macintosh. My father’s a journalist as well, and he interviewed you years ago. I’ve heard so much about you growing up. We also share a birthday. ”

He raised a glass and we followed his lead, “Happy birthday to us, young lady. Your father probably interviewed me before you were born because I developed a bad taste in my mouth for newspapers long ago. But I’m convinced that you’re the exception.” His assistant returned and placed a dish with whole fish over a blue salad before us all. Once everyone was served, the Scientist picked up his utensils first, and we all followed his lead again. It was delicious, and the assistant brought a dish for Jax as well. Yarah joined the table by order of Cain and ate her meal with the rest of us. There was a slight uncomfortable silence, but the Scientist filled the void as he neared ending the dish.

“The Platinum Arowana,” Dr. O’Donnell began, “It’s rare, banned from captivity and consumption in the United States,” he took another bite. “Maybe that is why I have always had an obsession with the Arowana. I caught one once with my late grandfather, who took me fishing. It was an empowering day. I took it as a sign that I would surpass mediocrity because my grandfather looked at me as if he had won the lottery.”

“And now all of your fortunes are coming to an end.” Mary cleared her throat.

“My fortune and legacy are far from over.” The Scientist looked back at me. “Don’t you think so, Ms. Patel?” I froze, “You are the one chosen to record history, aren’t you?”

“She’s come here to help Iam,” Cain answered for me, exposing the truth.

The Scientist leaned back in his chair after finishing his fish entirely, “Of course,” the assistant re-entered, confiscated the empty dish in front of the Scientist, and poured him white wine into a goblet glass before him.

“We all did,” Alan boomed by my side as the assistant cleaned after the rest of us.

“That’s right.” Roy chimed in as well as Jax, projecting a howl through the dining quarters.

“He’s a friend, and I believe his testimony,” I said.

Dr. O’Donnell leaned forward, “My dear, by agreeing to help Iam, you have agreed in fact to help the legacy of his proprietor.” He took a sip of the wine and stood from his seat. Cain and the rest of us remained. “Long ago, when Project Benevolence was a mere idea, I was scouted by the CIA’s Special Activities Center to manufacture soldiers after they learned of the transaction I made with the United States Marines of a unit of Delta phase androids. They were valued because they could be controlled entirely. They were bereft of artificial intelligence, which was the focus of fellow peers and developers at the time. I strayed away from A.I. because I learned at a young age that many forces of nature could be imitated… a mind could not. I created soldiers who would yield to any command made by their human superior, and I became a success. I sold androids to anyone willing to pay, but once the CIA got involved, they thought they owned me. They’ve paid me millions, excuse me, billions to manufacture instruments of war. I was good at it, but I had a greater purpose. I built this place to master my potential, and I’ve done so piously. I’ve discreetly created instruments of life here on Level 0: the home of Project Benevolence. It’s how I realized that I am better than my employers. This is my solution to save humanity.”

“How did you do it?” Roy asked, and it was the question the Scientist had been waiting for.

“There are many things a scientist can explain, but the phenomena of our collective connection to eternal consciousness cannot.” The Scientist nodded. “When I was young, I was exposed to a human heart that belonged to my father and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Though it’s the second most miraculous feature of all species (the first being the brain), I spent most of my time after my father’s death creating imitations of hearts. I was fifteen years when I constructed a functioning mechanical heart. Most boys my age were out playing sports and chasing girls, but I had just created a biological cardiovascular instrument more efficient than the natural-born hearts of our species based on the theory that we had a defect in our perfect design.... With a minor adjustment and alteration, we would be complete.

“When my mother passed away we were entering the darkest phase of the war and I went through a metamorphosis. I was experiencing grief for the first time in my life, or rather the first time I allowed it. Emotions were liabilities but upon my mother’s death, my world began to morph. She was opposed to my destructive capabilities; she’d rather I’d focus on my more enduring ingenuity which was creating. I thought that I was going crazy because I was torn. I was working on a project that could have been used to end the war and abandon Project Benevolence altogether, but in hopes of honoring my late mother, I could not. I let the war play on until I came to a decision. I decided to change the world but it could not be done overnight. I would need time to dramatize my ideas.

“In the beginning, Iam was the only participant, but soon, I came to govern hundreds of Project Benevolent participants while assuming my duties for the CIA. The happiness I experienced with the success made me blind to the discernment and judgment of those who would classify Iam as a mutant, or a test tube subject, because purpose in my life was restored. My work was revolutionary! Instead of fighting wars, we could finally be a species that lived in harmony.

“Iam became a son to me. He’s pure of heart, like my mother, and when I surgically removed his birth heart and replaced it with a bio-engineered cardiovascular of my design on the right side of his chest, I devoted myself to further producing and inciting a new evolution of the human race. I would save us. Iam was a reminder of the virtues we’d read about in fiction, and then the day came when he proved to be able to outperform common homo sapiens and humanoid androids alike.

“Now the government wants to come and put an end to my creation. Genocide is their condemnation. For so long, I’ve dreamed of the Benevolent people walking the Earth and making it a better place, and the government’s turned down my proposal. They have unanimously decided my work to be an abomination.”

“And how have you decided to respond, James?” Mary interjected, and the Scientist stood up straight, erecting his spine as he finished his glass of wine.

“I have chosen atonement. I am raging war against any and all who stand in the way of my vision. Be it the union, be it my beloved aunt Mary, or my greatest asset himself, Iam.” His assistant entered again and confiscated his empty glass.

I stood from my seat now, “What are you planning exactly?” I demanded.

“Plans I make can only be revealed in real time.” He assured me. “That way, they remain infallible.”

Roy stood now, followed by Alan, “You plan to rage war and think that there’s no one to stop you?”

“What else would you have me do, sit around and let them destroy all that I’ve worked for?” He argued. “It is not the American way.”

“You’re right, Dr. O’Donnell and you really have done impressive, important work.” I softened the tension building in the room. “We don’t agree with the government’s decision, but it seems counter-intuitive to start a war as a means to save lives.”

“Quite the contrary, Miss.” The Scientist smiled. “I am recycling and disposing of the previous humankind. I am the architect of the future and I am not afraid to choose violence. I have created a human race bereft of greed and gluttony, the way my creator intended. I am superior to my enemies because I am in tune with the forces of nature, like a surf-boarder manipulating a wave. I am the wave, and you might want to ride.”

“You don’t get to decide whose superior or not!” Alan stepped up.

“You had best realize that there is nothing no one can do to stop me. I made this flawless plan some time ago and it would be impossible for anyone to interrupt what’s already in momentum. God once flooded the Earth to rid creation of the vermin that fouled our world. It is due time for another cleansing.” Dr. O’Donnell argued.

“You are not God!” Roy challenged.

The Scientist smirked, “No, I’m not God… not yet.”

Suddenly, an alarm sounded, and a red light flashed through the dining hall as a mechanical voice boomed in surround sound, “The facility is now closed. 90 minutes until mandatory evacuation. Please vacate the premises immediately. The facility is now closed. 90 minutes until mandatory evacuation. Please vacate the premises immediately.”

“What have you done?” Roy approached him, but Cain stood to protect the Scientist, who continued to smirk.

Jax barked and came to my side. Yarah followed him, and the Scientist adjusted his bow-tie. “I believe that concludes our little dinner rendezvous.” The Scientist’s assistant drifted in with two hover chairs for the elders in the room. The alarm continued on. “I assure you’ll have a great story to tell, Ms. Patel. That is, if you make wise decisions. I humbly thank you for your audience. The ceremony will commence. Other guests are arriving with the intent to perform their regicide.” He sat in his hover chair, and so did Mary.

We watched them make their way to the exit led by Cain, who received an alert on his smartphone, “It’s the Boy, he’s here.”

# Chapter 17

I looked over the horizon from the window of the hover jet as Gesu slept peacefully in his father’s lap. It was a miraculous. I longed for the day the two would meet. I suffered depression being apart from my husband, but I stayed strong for our son. Iam’s return seemed to have alleviated stress but I feared it was temporary. Iam kissed his son’s forehead, and I overcome with joy. I wished Gesu could remember it always since it could potentially be his last with his father. It sounded strange, but I had prepared myself for the reality of my husband’s absence a long time ago.

I understood the man I married. He was the kindest soul, and he was a real hero to more than just me. I fell in love with him years ago and I knew then that I would have to share him with the world. He was a magnificent specimen with an abundance of grace. And now, though he sat with his son in arms, he was prepared for war. A parachute strapped to his back. One rested on my back as well.

He had planned to jump from the hover jet along with Joe and arrive in hopes of avoiding any trouble. I was afraid, but my trust in my husband was greater. Our son was dying, and this was the only place he could be remedied. I stared deep into my husband’s eyes, and the sadness returned. I was upset with the way life kept us apart. I felt sorry for my husband because all he wanted was family. “I wish that Yarah was here with us now.” I held our temples together.

Gesu’s eyes blinked but they hadn’t opened. He had been asleep for some time since we left the lake house. I hoped he would suffer no more. I had to let go of my fear otherwise it would consume me and destroy everything we’d achieved thus far. I refused to give up, and I knew that my husband wouldn’t allow it either.

We neared the facility, and Iam prepped for us to jump. The original pilot took over Joe’s position and would resume operating the aircraft as we ventured to Precinct Ground Zero. Iam placed our sleeping son on his chest underneath a blanket wrapped around him. He held him tight and jumped from the plane. I followed him and lastly, Joe. We descended into the brisk winds. I could see our reflections on the facility’s ceiling as the pilot flew the hover jet in the opposite direction. Joe kept a healthy distance from me, and I stayed near Iam and Gesu. Iam drew his parachute first, and I followed his lead. Gesu was waking in his father’s arms and it made the moment all the more beautiful.

Joe glided without his parachute activated and spoke with Iam through an ear pod communication, “What’s the plan, Captain?”

I listened in as Iam announced, “Air patrol has already alerted them of our arrival. Let’s land on that helipad. I’m sure we’ll meet Cain and the others there.”

Joe released his parachute and joined us in the slow descent to the helipad hundreds of feet below us. “Iam, there’s something I have to tell you. You’ve probably understood by now that I was hired to find your family.”

“Yes.” Iam responded.

“Well, I have a role to play, but I want you to know that I’m eternally indebted, Captain, and you can trust that I’m looking out for you and your family. My grandparents can attest to that. I didn’t inform the Scientist of your family’s location for months until I knew you were near. You should also know that Dr. O’Donnell isn’t my sole employer, and I’m not the only spy attending this rendezvous. Whatever happens know that I have your family’s best interest in mind.”

Iam understood and accepted Joe’s words. We were grateful for the clarification but still I felt nervous because of the Scientist. He was a monster, deceitful, and cautiously nefarious. When he shunned me after falling in love with Iam, I held a deep fear toward him. As a person, he was eccentric yet could be cunning and seemingly entertaining, but the trajectory of his loneliness and the envy he had of others was despicable. He was deliberately incorrigible in his ways with no plans of changing. He had the temerity to impose his beliefs on the world because he suffered internally. He was like many of the humans who he hoped to cure the world of.

Below, the helipad was nearing beneath us. My vision wasn’t as sharp as it used to be, but I could make out multiple figures waiting for us below. There were the familiar faces like those of Mary, Cain, and the Scientist of course. I noted new faces also: two additional gentlemen, a woman with a white dog on one side of her and a little girl in a white dress on the other. Her face was still a blur to me but I couldn’t take my eyes away from her because as we approached, she hid behind the leg of the unfamiliar woman.

Iam landed on the surface and the bystanders anxiously gathered around him, the little girl remaining behind the woman’s leg. I landed next and hastily removed the parachute harness from my body because alas, I recognized the little girl, she was my firstborn child, “Yarah!”

# Chapter 18

Iam floated down from the sky while holding a child in his arms in which I presumed to be the Boy whom he had been searching for all this time. His company were that of a woman and man I had yet to meet. I took the woman to be Iam’s wife, and as they neared, Yarah wrapped her arms around my leg as if hiding from her incoming parents. It touched my heart at that moment, especially since she chose me to protect her at the time. She was a sweet girl, and it made me think of the mother I’d be. Iam landed gently with the Boy in his arms and Mary went to him first as Roy followed. They helped Iam free of the parachute while Mary gave kisses to the Boy. He was a cheerful toddler and outrageously adorable.

Iam’s wife landed next. She stared at me and Yarah hiding behind my leg. It occurred to me then that just like Iam before, it would be the first time the two would have met in a long while. Iam’s wife projected, pronouncing Yarah’s name with a foreign accent. I nudged Yarah forward to her mother, “Go on.” With a little encouragement, Yarah rushed into her mother’s arms.

“Yarah!” The woman exclaimed as she picked the girl up from the ground with tears flooding her face. “My child.” Iam joined in on the warm moment with his son still in his arms. I stood mystified because this was what Iam deserved; to be with those he loved. He had waited long enough. Cain watched the affair from afar, still on duty, and the Scientist remained respectful, letting the family have their moment.

Alan took my hand and led me in on the family group hug, along with Roy, Jax, and Mary risen from her hover chair. It seemed surreal and I wanted to talk with Iam the way we had when we first met. This was a result of synergy. We all showed our support for Iam and his family and wrapped ourselves around them, and we meant to protect each other.

“Yarah, this is your baby brother, Gesu.” Yarah kissed her brother upon introduction. This was the Boy that the Scientist envisioned to be the leader of his new world.

“Thank you everyone, Iyla and I are very grateful.” Iam said as the additional man landed and removed his parachute.

Iam nodded to the man and separated from the group, taking with him Gesu. He greeted Cain, wrapping his arm around him, and though Cain did not reciprocate the affection, he accepted.

Iam then presented Gesu to the Scientist, “I have upheld my end of the bargain, now do what you have to do to help him.”

The Scientist studied the Boy. The additional man stood on the side of the Scientist and Mary went to Iam’s as the Scientist responded, “It’s astonishing that he has survived this long.”

“You can behave as if this is another one of your sanctimonious achievements, or you can do the right thing.” Iam said. The tension between the two could have been cut with a knife. “Where is the replacement?”

“In my lab, where I’ll perform an incision.” A unit of Boeing Hovercrafts arrived noisily above and flew over us as the Scientist responded. “But first I’ll deal with the government and our Closing Ceremony.”

“Make space, they’re coming down fast!” The additional man commanded.

“The whole property is being seized by the Pentagon tonight.” The Scientist barked.

The hovercrafts neared and landed on the helipad. Six android soldiers moved out and approached Cain in succession, they saluted him, “Lieutenant.”

“At ease,” Cain spoke.

“Your authority has been overruled. Sky patrol has been confiscated by the Pentagon Force Protection Agency. Now arriving are the Secretary of Defense, the Commander of the Special Activities Center of the CIA, and company.” Four military airbuses entered the vicinity above slowly with intentions to land on the helipad.

“Attention, we will escort the Scientist and company to their positions.” Cain ordered. “Iam come with us. We’ll get the operation done before the facility is set for demolition.”

“Have you forgotten your most crucial task, Cain?” Dr. O’Donnell asked as his assistant arrived with his hover chair.

Cain shook his head and looked at the Scientist. “I have not forgotten *your* tasks.” The androids stepped aside as the militant airbuses landed on the helipad. About sixty-seven armed human soldiers moved out and formed two lines with space in the middle for six government Officials dressed in black suits to enter. We congregated behind the Scientist who awaited the arrival of his guest in his hover chair. Jax growled next to me, and the government Officials walked through the aisle set apart for them as Iam, Cain, Roy, and the additional man whose name I had yet to learn, along with the android soldiers saluted them.

The Scientist saluted from his seat, “Welcome, gentleman.” He greeted each of the Officials and shook their hands, and for the last one, he said, “Commander, a special welcome to you.”

“James,” the Commander uttered. “I hear a happy birthday is in order.”

“In time for the most joyous occasion.” The Scientist said.

“Remind me, James, why is the ceremony inside the facility?” The Commander questioned.

The Scientist smiled, “Just a brief farewell gathering, if you will. I appreciate the devotion.”

The men waited to progress further into the facility, but something caught the attention of the Scientist in the sky; a large orange blimp floated in view surrounded by several smaller aircraft and electric helicopters. “What in tarnation-” The Officials placed hands over their faces to hide from the intruding cameras sprouting out from the air-crafts. “It’s a media trail!” The Scientist exclaimed.

The Androids scanned the incomers with a new light in their eyes, “Now arriving media outlet: CNN, BBC, USA Today, New York Times...”

The identities of the Government Officials had been compromised and they tried to hide. Alan and I looked at one another since we were responsible for the tip of the press. It was our way of helping and we were sure they’d be safe from any violent assaults. If Iam chose me to record history, I set for us to have some reinforcements as well. The soldiers did their best to shield the Officials from further exposure as Cain arranged for everyone to reenter the facility.

“Everyone inside!” Cain demanded, and the android soldiers coordinated us all to exit from the helipad back into the facility in an orderly manner. The press never landed on the helipad, and I was unable to see where they would go. In whatever case, at least they were able to attain evidence of the facility in case I was unable to.

We paused in the lobby before heading into the tram as, “75 minutes until mandatory evacuation. Please vacate the premises. 75 minutes until mandatory evacuation. Please vacate the premises.” The mechanical voiced boom through an intercom once more.

Cain turned to us behind the back of the officials. “Iam come. Bring your son but for the rest of you, stay here. We’ll return.”

“I’ll join the escort.” The additional man insisted.

“So will I.” Iyla proposed, but Cain shook his head.

“You stay here,” Cain warned.

“Why can’t we all go?” Iyla asked.

“Yeah, we just got together!” I defended.

“He’s right. You stay here, I’ll protect our son,” Iam said, leveraging so that he could save the Boy’s life. He kissed his wife and daughter and looked over the rest of us with gratitude. In return, he received our blessing.

“Be safe, Iam,” I said, and his wife looked at me.

“We’ll stay here with your wife and daughter and protect them,” Roy vowed to Iam and shook his hand. “You were a young boy when you saved my life. It’s an honor to be able to repay the favor.” Iam nodded his thanks, and without another word, he and Cain joined the Scientist and company on the tram.

After they’d gone, I turned to Iyla who had reached for Yarah nearby. Alan and I watched them, along with Jax and Roy. “So sorry,” she spoke as she noticed us watching. “I should introduce myself… my name is Iyla Gonsalves David.” She smiled at us as the tram departed. “You all must be friends of Iam.” But soon, her smile faded, and Roy noticed that she was tired and should sit. He led her to a seat nearby, and we followed.

“I’m Roy Macintosh.” Roy helped her to the seat, and Yarah sat beside her. “This is my son, Alan, and his partner, Alissa Patel. Iam saved her life as well.”

She smiled at each of us. “I’m sorry I’m this way at the moment.”

“Please don’t be sorry about anything,” I said.

“It’s just that I do not trust the Scientist at all.” She wrapped her arm around her daughter, “The last time Iam brought one of our children near him, I did not see her for over two years and one-hundred and seven days.”

“Well, I don’t trust him either,” Alan said. “I just met the guy, and I’ve already had it with the old man. I’ll help make sure your son returns myself.”

“You don’t understand.” She breathed and looked weary. I sat beside her.

“Do you know what all the Scientist has planned?” I asked, but she shook her head and held onto Yarah.

“The Scientist has hidden something in my son’s heart.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know exactly. Whatever he’s hidden, he has been waiting impatiently for it.”

I looked to Alan, who had turned his attention to the vacant tram waiting behind us with an android still operating it. Without another word, he went towards it, “Alan! Where are you going?” I called after him.

“I’m going to help put an end to this war nonsense.” He waved, and I was surprised. I looked to Roy, and he nodded approvingly of his son. I knelt down to my dog, Jax. “Good boy, go and help.” Jax immediately obeyed. If my own father was here, he’d be proud since it was his idea to gift me the puppy who was now 87 lbs, combat trained force to be reckoned with. My father sent for him to protect me navigating the big city, and now we were involved in a dangerous expedition to help the world. I smiled as I watched Alan and Jax board the tram and the android operator surprisingly obeyed orders to go underground.

Roy and I stayed with Iyla and Yarah on the seat. “You have a brave partner.” Iyla smiled at me. “He looks like a keeper.” She was beautiful and kind, and I could see why Iam would have become enamored with her. Even through her strife, she learned to smile. She held onto her child, and the child held back. I imagined my own child and Iyla saw it in my face. “You have suffered, Iam told me.”

I felt somewhat embarrassed because I didn’t expect Iam to tell her about me or if he even would. “We all have suffered.” I took a deep breath. “Iam saved my life and then days later, asked for my help.”

“And you have. I saw the way my little girl responded to you. It takes a village to raise a child, they say.” She kissed Yarah on her head. “It made me feel glad to know that there are still kind people in this world.”

“When Alissa told me that she had met a man named Iam,” Roy joined in. “I thought we all had been scammed because the day I offered to tell Alissa about a boy named Iam, whom I’d met during the war all those years ago, turned out to be the exact day he would save her life as well.” Iyla looked at me and held my hand. “How serendipitous, the way life plays out sometimes.”

Then the reality of the unpredictability of the current situation settled in to the forefront of my mind. With the involvement of the government and the Scientist’s arrogance, I could only hope we would be triumphant.

# Chapter 19

Gesu paced his breathing in my arms as he rested again. His naps were brief but frequent. Though he was suffering, he was more so an incredible Boy. I understood the Scientist’s vision for him but was against the decided undertaking. The Scientist was someone I trusted for a long time, and though our paths have naturally divided through time, it did not mean we had to be against each other.

I’d made a decision to fight when it meant protecting the defenseless. I also share with the defenseless how to be strong on their own accord. Being strong had to be developed at a young age and practiced during advanced age. Once Gesu awakened, I placed him to stand next to me on the floor and he held onto my leg. He had been dependent enough understandably, however he would have to learn to rise above his handicap with or without the Scientist’s aid.

“The Scientist knows,” Joe began, standing beside me as I looked onward at Dr. O’Donnell whispering in Cain’s ear some twenty yards away. “He knows there are spies here.”

“What’s the spy’s objective?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, but I do know that the government believes they’ve neutralized the facility totally. They’re under the impression that they’ve secured all federal assets and confiscated control of all productivity. I’d guess the spy is supposed to make sure it’s all true.” Joe said as Dr. O’Donnell separated from Cain yards ahead.

We were on Level 0 of Project Benevolence, and I remembered the last time I’d been here. Not much had changed except for low-rise stage with a podium that the Scientist occupied in front of the Grand Aquarium. His assistant stood a couple of feet behind him along Mary and Cain, and a dozen of android soldiers believed to be under the influence of the Government Officials. Nothing else remained on the level and Joe and I stood in the furthest row behind the officials and soldiers, waiting for the closing ceremony to begin. The Benevolent citizens were moved to an area unknown and it was apparent that the Scientist had a surprise for his attendees on top of what he needed from Gesu’s heart.

The Scientist had everyone stalled at the moment, myself included. There was nothing to be done to stop his assault since it had been in production for over twenty years. Dr. O’Donnell steered me to think of the bigger picture, an ability I used to develop a strategy of my own.

My attention gravitated to a captivating specimen floating in the Aquarium behind the Scientist. It was random yet, I could not peel my eyes away from its translucent tentacles and its transparent aura that fascinated me. At some point it paused and its tentacles waved to stay afloat in place. *The Cnidaria!* Dr. O’Donnell told me once of the creature; it was known as the immortal jellyfish and it was affecting me. It brought its tentacles underneath itself and kept on its journey. I followed it with my eyes until it was out of view.

The Scientist adjusted the microphone before him and cleared his throat, “Welcome, comrades, welcome. Words cannot properly convey the gratitude I have for this evening. I’ve never been fond of sentiments, but after 31 years of residing and creating in this atmosphere, one can only feel so little. In addition, this evening marks my sixth-ninth birthday, so I am in the spirit to celebrate.

“I acknowledge the generosity of my continual employment in a new controlled institution and the hopes to continue to perform on behalf of the Central Intelligence Agency, and on behalf of my country, the United States of America. But before we move on, I’d like to offer you…” I began to feel the ground shake subtly underneath, but no one else seemed to notice it, not even Joe beside me, who was focused on the stage. At the same time, Gesu shook loose of my leg and when I turned to go after him, I saw Alan and Alissa’s dog, Jax escorted behind us by android soldiers. It seemed that the androids were still under the facility’s jurisdiction. The Boy ran towards the dog, and they played. I nodded to Alan, welcoming him, and the Scientist continued.

“… a glimpse of the future, a bright future that should you be so destined to see, will echo in history. I’ve invited you to a preview of what is to come in a matter of time. Allow me to introduce my latest phenomena… my ‘tour de force’… Gesu.”

All eyes landed on the small being behind me who was doing his best to wrestle with the dog. Jax was gentle and playful with the Boy, and he assumed a protector role when a light shined over Gesu who paid no mind to the summons of the Scientist. Jax did, and he led the Boy through the aisle made out for him by the soldiers to the stage. I followed along with Joe and Alan. I kept an eye on the Scientist the whole while and his on mine. Gesu would be safe, but as for the others, I was not sure, myself included. Gesu kept a hand on the back of Jax, and we traveled through the herd of soldiers and government Officials. He showed no fear when we arrived at the stage. The Scientist reached for the Boy, and Jax growled at him.

“Pipe down, dog,” The Scientist gnarled back and took the Boy’s hand with Jax’s allowing. The rest of us joined the ranks of Cain and Mary as Dr. O’Donnell lifted Gesu into the air before the audience. “Behold, ladies, and gentlemen, the leader of the new world.” Chatter erupted among the Officials as Gesu began to cry. Mary took the Boy from the Scientist and brought him out of the spotlight.

“Dr. O’Donnell, what is this?” One of the Officials shouted.

The Scientist continued, “Why, this is a celebration, a closing ceremony, and my response to your unfortunate incompetence.” Cain touched a button on his lapel, and the various android soldiers behind us drew their weapons and pointed them at the Government Officials and human soldiers. “This is, in actuality, the endgame of your control over me.” The Scientist turned from the podium and exited the stage as the government soldiers drew their weapons as well.

The Secretary of Defense spoke up, “Give it up, we’ve overridden your Android systems, you have no offense.” He approached the stadium. “This is quite the revealing behavior though, James, and a breach of your contract. We have forces with the means to end your illusions of *grandeur,* Dr. O’Donnell…” *Splat!* A carbon bullet spiraled through the skull of the Official, and for a split second in the calm before the storm, I looked at Cain, who had given the order to perform the kill. He dropped to the floor to draw his gun, and I followed his lead.

Bullets flew from both sides, and I looked to see that the Scientist and Mary escaped through the Aquarium with Gesu. Jax and the Scientist’s assistant continued near them as Alan and Joe remained by my side. Cain led the assault with his android soldiers behind him. They were new and advanced unit, controlled by the button on Cain’s lapel. The Government failed to encrypt the new breed which blended in with the old. Soon Cain escaped following the Scientist and company through the private Aquarium entrance.

Joe drew his weapon, an electric-powered Colt .45. “What’s the plan, Captain?” He asked in the middle of the fire. The Commander of the CIA and human soldiers stood their ranks as the android soldiers attacked vigorously.

“Let’s stick with the Scientist… for now.” I urged. They moved behind me as I followed the trail behind the androids at battle to where the Scientist’s office resided. The gateway was almost closed after Cain’s entrance, but I managed to pick up the speed and hold it open for my comrades Joe and Alan to enter. We made it to an elevator.

“I remember the code.” Alan stepped in front of me, “I watched Cain use it earlier.” He punched in what he remembered and it worked.

I nodded to him as the elevator transported us to Dr. O’Donnell’s secret domain. At the entrance, I knocked three times with the door hook, and it opened. It was dark in the home as if it had been vacant for some time. “Dr. O’Donnell? Cain?” but not a stir.

Joe flashed a flashlight from his utility belt. “There!” He pointed up the stairs, and we followed his lead. I drew my Smith & Wesson and I handed it to Alan. At first, he fumbled with the handgun, but after a little familiarity, he looked like a force to be reckoned with. We traveled through a long dark corridor after the stairs, not a sound save for our breaths moving to the end. We arrived at the final elevator to the Scientist’s laboratory.

The intercom sounded again, “The facility is now closed. 60 minutes until mandatory evacuation. Please vacate the premise immediately.”

The elevator opened to a grandeur operating theater. Cain turned to acknowledge our entrance and I understood what he had agreed to do by the look in his eyes. We approached him anyway and stood near a transparent dome concealing the operating room. Jax sat beside the dome as well, a few feet away from Cain. Gesu rested on an operating table with eyes closed as Mary and Dr. O’Donnell garnished themselves in operating scrubs, masks, and gloves. The assistant stood aside in scrubs as well and would help when summoned. A couple of electric tools rested beside the operating table. The Scientist did not study medicine formally, but he had done many incisions before to know what he was doing. Anger grew within me at Dr. O’Donnell. I refused to let history repeat itself.

“Your wife mentioned something was placed inside your son... what is it?” Alan asked.

“Dr. O’Donnell, he’s going to remove a key from the Boy’s heart.” Cain stated without removing his eyes away from the beginning operation.

“A key for what exactly?” Alan asked.

“How long is this going to take?” Joe asked with his gun still holstered toward the entrance of the lab. “In the rare case the government gets through your androids there won’t be much we could do to stop them.”

“It won’t matter because the key is all he needs,” Cain said.

“How do you mean?” Alan asked.

“Well, it doesn’t sound like that key is going to stop this place from exploding.” Joe professed.

“True! And we also have people and aircraft to pick up.” Alan offered.

“You two can go back and protect the others. I’ll wait here until after the operation,” I said.

“You’re not getting in there,” Cain said plainly. “Everything is already set in motion.”

“He has my son in there along with the intention to obliterate millions of innocent people,” I said.

“He has *our* future in there!” Cain stepped in my face. “And there is no such thing as ‘innocent’ people.”

“You can’t really agree with this,” Alan argued.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of him,” I said as Cain crossed his arms and turned back to the dome where the Scientist shined a bright light over the sleeping Boy.

Joe turned to me, “Are you sure you want us to leave you here alone?”

I nodded, yes. “You want us to go back from where we came from?” Alan asked.

“There are probably casualties out there, but for the sake of more blood spill, you two had best go back and get our family and friends a head start out of here.” I urged. “We’ll be behind you in no time. Jax will stay here too, he seems to have assumed guardianship over Gesu.” I said, and Joe nodded and complied along with Alan.

“Make it back up, yeah?” Joe said and shook my hand with his mechanical arm. Alan followed his example, and I saw them on their way.

During the send-off, I missed the opportunity to see Cain enter the Dome, and all that remained on the exterior were Jax and me. Cain dressed himself in scrubs and gloves as Mary cleaned the area where the laser would cut over the Boy’s now bare chest. His breathing was controlled by an external respirator, and I watched as the Scientist used the laser to open the chest. He worked diligently, placing the laser aside, then used a metal sternum spreader to keep the skin from overlapping. I was grateful Mary was inside and provided warmth for the Boy who lay asleep during the procedure. The Scientist moved carefully, unbothered by the battle we left behind, and I didn’t take my eyes off him. Cain retrieved a Tupperware case with frost hanging from its sides, showing signs of previous solidification.

“The new heart,” I whispered as Mary took the case from Cain and opened it on a counter a couple of feet apart from the operating table. She removed an engineered black pulsating heart from the case, drenched in fluids that resembled blood. Cain retrieved the case again and followed Mary as she carried the new heart over to the Scientist.

“The facility is now closed. Please vacate the premises immediately. 45 minutes until mandatory evacuation.”

The Scientist opened the Boy’s chest with the metal tools and removed the Boy’s older, biologically engineered heart from his chest. He handed it to his assistant, and with Cain’s help, she placed it in the case of the new heart. Jax barked while looking into the dome.

The Scientist took his time attaching the new heart intrinsically, carefully connecting tubes and nerves where they belong. After some time, he began sealing the incision point with another laser instrument. The Boy was able to breathe on his own accord and was removed from the respirator. The procedure was complete, but still, he slept. Jax was eager to enter the Dome and found a way in. He pushed it open, and it caught the Scientist by surprise.

“Damn, dog!” I entered after Jax, and the Scientist looked up at me just as he removed the gloves from his hands. He washed his hands at a sink, and I looked at Cain holding the case with the defective heart and key. “There,” Dr. O’Donnell removed his mask. “I’ve held up my end of the bargain. Your son is now healed.” He turned to look at Cain. “We must leave at once.” He turned his back on me, and I went to the operating table where Gesu still slept. Mary smiled at me as she cleaned his wound and re-clothed him in a new shirt.

“The facility is now closed. Please vacate the premises immediately. 30 minutes until mandatory evacuation.”

I went to the Boy, and I picked him up from the table. His eyes flickered open and closed as I kissed his brow. Mary took him from my arms and wrapped him in blankets. The procedure had been a success, and I couldn’t wait to see what Gesu was like, free of inabilities and in full health. Of course, he would need time to heal, and in the meantime, I had to save innocent lives.

I turned to see the Scientist with the case containing the key in his possession. Cain stood between us in means to protect him. “Let’s be on our way, shall we.”

I ignored Cain and glared at the Scientist. I couldn’t rush him and snatch the box because I figured he had other defenses in place, “I’m not going to let you use that.”

“Not now, Iam, I’ve had enough of your rebellion.” Cain stood beside him, and Mary with Gesu, stood next to me and Jax. “I knew you were capable of regaining your memories, and it makes you worthy of one last chance to choose my side. Let the fondness you have for your dear son to be motivation enough to make the right decision. You have been an invaluable asset, and I want you on my side. If you would like to see your child prosper, then we will have to learn to work together again. I’ve built this not just for me. I’m building this new world to bring about true unity. Look around you, the faces that have come into your life and the places you have wandered, your whole reality has been by my influence. I know you understand. You don’t agree with my ways, but trust me my friend, I know best.”

“Said every tyrant and self-proclaimed world leader,” Mary interjected. “It doesn’t take a savant to create more hate and destruction.”

I stepped closer to him, which prompted Cain to advance too, but I showed no change of heart. “This new war you propose will backtrack centuries of progress, and you know that. I know that you have probably calculated every possible outcome of your decision, but you will fail and many will die for no reason at all. I remember now what you’ve done, and what you have had Federico do, but it is not going to work. ”

“Have you forgotten to whom you speak? There is no possibility of failure, because the battle is already won. I realized the power that I have inside, and it took me quite a while to learn what I could do with it. In the last war, they nearly destroyed each other, and I sat watching, knowing that I single-handedly could have ended the war whenever and however I wanted. There were no other engineers or geniuses on either side of the fence with the powers I offered my nation. They all, in actuality, came to work for me… The same way your father had.”

I looked at Cain and then back at the Scientist. I knew that I shouldn’t have let him get into my head, but curiosity rang through me, “What are you talking about?”

Gesu began to stir in Mary’s arms, and the Scientist knew he had my interest. “Iam, did you think your mother found Project Benevolence by happenstance?” He sighed and stepped closer to me, and I allowed it. “It’s time I told you the truth. It’s time I told all of you the truth… Your father worked for me and he is not dead… nor is he missing.”

# Chapter 20

I stepped over the cold floor of the tunnel leading out from underneath the Aquarium. I was close behind Joe, who I had just met, and it bewildered me who I was at the time. When I woke that day, I thought it was just going to be another day of work and dinner, but then I was exploring a gigantic, confidential warfare manufacturing facility I had never known to exist. It was strange, my dad and my long-awaited girlfriend both met a man who grew up in this facility. I almost envied their admiration of Iam, and I wanted to know what all the fuss was about.

Something came over me while being here and especially when meeting Iam. I was raised by a soldier, my dad and I’d always admired him and his stories, but I had never got to experience what it was like to be a soldier myself. I became a photographer by request of my mom when she assured me that it was less dangerous and that it would still get me plenty of attention from women. She was right, and maybe that’s what kept Alissa at bay for some time. Now I had the opportunity to prove to Alissa that I could be a soldier, too, in some capacity. I didn’t know exactly what I was doing, but like I said, something inside me was taking over.

Sounds of battle echoed into the tunnel before the gate fully opened back onto Level 0. “Get ready.” Joe insisted, and I raised the S&W Iam gifted me. The gates to the tunnel opened, and we tread slowly out from the Aquarium into the fight that took place raging on between the android and government soldiers alike. Both sides barricaded themselves, and the androids, though smaller in numbers, were subtly overpowering the humans. The lifeless body of the Secretary of Defense still lay near the stage. “This isn’t our fight, let’s go around,” Joe commanded.

“What? What if there are some people we can help?” I argued.

“You want to go up against those androids, kid?” Joe barked. “You just learned to hold that gun, and until you learn how to use it, you had best just follow orders.” He moved away from me, and I took a deep breath and followed.

“What if they attack us?” I ran close behind him, stepping over corpses of both man and machine while doing so.

“*Ex machina*. They’re programmed to recognize us as allies as long as we do not interfere with their tasks.” We made it past the stage far right of the battle zone.

“How could the government have not seen this coming?” Joe stopped in his tracks and turned to me.

“What’s up with the third degree?” He asked, and I stopped to study and formulate a response. “Maybe you’re ignorant of all that’s going on, but you had better start believing in the possibility that you are not here by mere coincidence.”

“You work for the Scientist as well?” He stepped closer to me.

“I chose a side.” Joe spit on the ground. “I owed Iam my life, and once I learned how to find him, I found this place, this world, and these people. I knew that there was a new world order being born, and I had the chance to be part of it. What are you going to do about it?”

He didn’t wait for my response and instead turned to continue on past the battle. I stood in place and watched the androids triumph over the wilting human race remaining on Level 0.

“You won’t get away with this...” A human screamed and I saw it was the Commander of the CIA’s Special Forces. “You’ll be caught and charged for perjury. You’re all traitors of the Union.”

An android stood over and released a round into the Commander’s head. His blood joined the pool of fluids that covered the floor. I wanted to barf. I had never seen such destruction until that day, and in an instant, I had seen enough. The androids brutally terminated the fallen human soldiers as a couple of them approached my way. I couldn’t move. I was frozen, stuck, even though my brain was telling me to run away. The closer they got, the more I started to panic.

“Stand back!” Joe came and shook me by the shoulders. “Focus”. I snapped out of it and moved along with Joe again. The android soldiers fell back and continued their assault on the human soldiers.

We made it to the tram and entered. The warning lights flashed red in the tram spiraling upward, and suddenly I felt shame. I would only be returning with a weapon and not with the promise I had made. I prepared myself for the anxiety that the upcoming meeting could possibly trigger.

We arrived at the lobby, and they were already standing impatiently. Alissa scurried over at the sound of our arrival. I could see the worry on her face as she plunged into my arms, “I can’t believe what’s happening.”

“Are you okay? Where’s everyone else?” Alissa asked. I looked past her at my dad.

“20 minutes until mandatory evacuation. Please vacate the premise immediately.” The mechanical voice chimed yet again.

“Where’s my husband?” Iyla asked once we got closer. “Where’s my son?” But suddenly, the ground beneath began to shake. We all looked at one another and tried to keep our balance. The little girl held onto her mother.

“We have to get out of here,” Joe ordered and encouraged us to exit.

“No!” Iyla raised her voice. “I will not go without my family.”

“They’ll meet us later, you have my word. Let’s move!” Joe pushed us forward out of the facility and out onto the helipad. Alissa held onto Iyla as Joe called for his pilot and aircraft with a smart device.

“We got space in mine.” My dad chimed in, and Alissa led Iyla to him. But before boarding, Iyla looked back at Joe and me behind her.

“Please, at least tell me they’re okay.” A tear formed in her eye.

I felt bad because I hadn’t said anything. I didn’t know anything, and until I saw these happenings with my own eyes, I didn’t believe anything. Now my reality was different, “The Scientist was performing a heart transplant procedure before Iam sent us back to you.”

“Which Dr. O’Donnell’s surely completed by now,” Joe assured her. “Don’t worry, they’re well protected.”

I didn’t want to mention the dead Officials and human soldiers for the sake of scaring the women. I was stunned, and Alissa was beginning to notice. “Even Jax had taken it upon himself to protect them, it seems.” Alissa’s eyes widened. “He growled at anyone who stepped too close to Gesu.” I forced a smile, and it seemed to do the trick because the women had continued to pile into my dad’s hoverjet. He ignited the engine.

“I’ll have my pilot pick them up once I receive their location.” Joe shared, and Iyla accepted it as good news.

Alissa sat beside me in the hover jet cabin in the last row behind Iyla and Yarah, with Joe in the cockpit with my dad. Alissa leaned into me, “Why do you have a gun?”

I did my best to conceal it behind me and under my shirt, “Iam gave it to me.” I decided to tell her the truth since we were a little out of earshot. “The Commander… the Secretary of Defense… they’re all…”

But she understood what I was saying without me finishing the confession. “How? I thought they controlled the androids.”

“Somehow, Dr. O’Donnell regained control, or something.” I wrapped my hand over hers. “Jax was brave - I didn’t want to take him away from what he found to be his newfound duty.”

She forced a smile. “You did the right thing. I’m just hoping they get out in time.” She said, and I looked away from her. “Hey?” She turned my face back to hers. “What is it?”

“Nothing, it’s just I just don’t know what to do or what to think.”

She held my hand a little tighter. “Neither do I.”

“All I know is something really bad is going to happen.” I looked at her. “Whatever it is, I’m glad we have each other.” Our foreheads touched, and we stayed that way for a moment. And then I noticed eyes on us, and they were those of Iyla. She watched us for a beat and then returned her gaze forward.

We still hadn’t taken off. “What’s the hold-up?” Joe asked.

“It looks like the government.” My dad said, and I looked out of my window at what he was referring to: 13 military units descended from the sky and landed on the helipad. We remained inside our seats except for my dad, who got out.

“Where are you going?” Joe asked.

“No use in scurrying off without a word.” He closed the door behind him, and I watched as one hundred human soldiers unloaded in a hurry from their military sky units and onto the helipad. One soldier who assumed a leadership position stood apart and saw my dad approaching him. My dad posed in salute, and the soldier accepted his council. I wished that I could make out what they were saying, but I couldn’t, so I watched the soldiers flock into the facility instead. “They must be the mandatory evacuation the facility warned about,” I said.

Yarah admitted, “I’m really scared.”

Alissa and I leaned forward to show our support. “Just breathe.” Iyla rubbed her back.

“Where’s my brother and papa? And my uncle!” Yarah pouted.

“They’re all strong and intelligent, you agree?” Alissa asked. She had a way with people that I always admired, and it resembled in her journalism as well.

“Yes.” Yarah nodded.

“Then believe in good outcomes. Iam is counting on all of us to stay strong.” Alissa smiled, and Yarah nodded again. She looked at Iyla. “I believe in our new friends and family.” Iyla nodded now, too, but I could tell that fear consumed her mind as well. She had been through so much, and there were absolutely no comforting words anyone could have given her until her son and husband returned.

My dad returned. He opened the door to the cockpit and looked back at all of us. “Apparently, the Government Officials are unresponsive and declared trapped against their will.”

“The Scientist’s holding them off, Captain Macintosh, let’s just get out of here already. I’ve got the coordinates.” Joe barked.

“Everyone buckle up.” My dad settled himself and took us off the ground. We all strapped in our seat belts. Iyla looked over the facility as the final soldier entered inside.

Once we were far enough away, Joe touched a device in his ear and uttered, “Paging section 909, we have evacuated all exits, over.”

My dad looked over to him, but before he could question, our aircraft was impacted by an explosion below. The gravitational push expunged us further into the sky, and we all held onto each other to make it through the turbulence.

“Close your eyes,” Iyla told her daughter, who screamed. “It’ll be over soon.”

“Hold on!” My dad shrieked as he tried to keep the aircraft steady and from letting it spiral out of control. I was able to look below again from my window, and I saw the particular part of the facility at the helipad, caught on fire. The airbuses of the government were obliterated to pieces which meant so were any casualties close enough to the disruption. I watched as yet another explosion occurred in the same place. My dad was still ill-prepared for the impact and was not able to ride the pressure as smoothly as he had hoped. “I’ll get it under control!” He assured us, but somehow, the door nearest Yarah came ajar.

Iyla screamed as the pressure pulled to usurp Yarah’s small body out of the aircraft. Her seat-belt came unloose, and Iyla held onto the little girl with both arms. “Hold onto me!” Iyla instructed, and the girl obeyed, but the door and pressure remained the same.

“Dad, do something!” I screamed since Alissa and I were unable to move because the aircraft was tilted too far to the side. I fought through gravity, and Alissa helped me release my seat belt before the little girl could be released from her seat entirely. I strained myself to reach the door just in time as Iyla was vacuumed from her seat instead of Yarah. Her seat belt loosened and Alissa was able to advance to catch Iyla by a single arm before she flew out too far. My dad did his best to get the hover jet upright again.

Yarah cried, “Mommy!” I held Yarah back from reaching since Iyla had the aid of Alissa, me, and now Joe, who helped us succeed in pulling Iyla back into the aircraft. Once she was back in, I managed to close the door, and we all panted, catching our breaths. I sat on the floor as the brief moments of relief came to an end. We could hear more explosions below but luckily we were far enough to no longer feel the impacts.

“We’re almost in the clear, standby.” My dad said, stabilizing the aircraft finally. More bombs detonated below and this time, I did not watch out of the window since the explosions were nonstop. Alissa sat next to me on the floor, while Iyla and Yarah held onto each other after the disturbance, weeping.

My eyes shifted then to those of Joe in the co-pilot seat in the cockpit with my dad. He looked at me too, as I remembered him telling me that he had chosen a side. I understood then the gravity of what he meant.

# Chapter 21

Waves crashed gradually over the artificial rocks on Level 6 of the facility. We stood over sand leading to Dr. O’Donnell’s massive oceanic creation that he named the Modulus Ocean. It was a semblance and near identical replica of the Atlantic by comparison. Despite the Modulus Ocean’s finite measurements, it was served to be just as exhilarating and dangerous as the waters it imitated. One could reach the ocean’s floor to the Aquarium below and venture back to the surface in a matter of hours. But getting across the waters was particularly challenging without a boat or raft.

When I was younger, I would come to swim or surf in these waters. The Modulus Ocean stretched for 77 miles far and wide, and to the end of its restrictions, one could see an island in the distance with a volcano sprouting from it. I’d try to make it to the island as a youth, but often, the water pressure and the bionic waves overpowered me. Like the level below, the solar-powered sunlight never set here, and it both energized and drained specimens the way the natural sun did.

Cain and I stood ahead of Mary, the Scientist, and his assistant on the sandy beach. Mary held the sleeping Gesu in her arms and Jax stood beside them. My gaze was fixated on the remote man-made island toward where the Modulus Ocean concluded miles ahead. At this distance, it almost looked like a mirage. I remembered a time I overcame the pressures of the waves as an adolescent and made it to the island. I did not remember what I had found; it was possibly uninhibited or incomplete, but then the Scientist told us otherwise. I would have thought it was a ruse, but Cain was equally invested in going as I was. I knew I would need Cain’s help if I was going to stop the Scientist and so I complied with the game that was chosen to play. If what the Scientist said was true, and that my father was alive and hiding here, then maybe he would help us in preventing more bloodshed too, granted he was free from the Scientist’s influence. It was wishful thinking since this facility was home to declared fugitives, abominations, and android soldiers which were all under the control of Dr. O’Donnell. Still, I had to hope that my father was who I thought he was. I remembered few details of him, I remembered that he was an engineer and a man of his word. I remembered he built an electric vehicle on his own when he was in high school, and the flowers he would send my mother every Sunday until he went missing. I had to have faith that, in the end, he would help a peaceful cause.

“20 minutes until mandatory evacuation. Please vacate the premises immediately.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Mary said. “We have to be sure the Benevolent’s are evacuated and secure.”

“Everything’s in control.” The Scientist assured her. “Cain and Iam must see what I’ve kept from them their whole life and why.”

“Iam your son and wife are what’s important now,” Mary insisted.

I turned to her, “This feels important too. If he’s still alive, then I must know. We’ll meet you at the evacuation point.”

“This is why he can manipulate you, Iam,” Mary argued further. “Don’t fall for any more of James’s timely schemes. Remember when he erased your memory the last time? You finally have your family together, don’t lose them again because of his treachery.”

“Enough!” Dr. O’Donnell raised his voice. “He’s made his decision.”

Cain and I removed our shoes and walked into the ocean as a large metal raft floated before us. Cain stepped on it first. I took one more look at my sleeping son in Mary’s arms before I turned back to the ocean and stepped onto the raft with Cain. As we drifted away from the eastern ocean shore and floated west, I had a bad feeling that Mary knew what to expect of this brotherly expedition. But I remained focused because my intuition knew what it was doing. Sometimes intuition can overpower logic and for good riddance. Mary stood with my son in her arms long after the Scientist turned away into the glass wall, mirroring the reflection of the ocean. I could see a tear in her eye, and when it dropped, it landed on the forehead of Gesu. She waved, and I could tell it was for good wishes as she exited with Jax following. He gave a hearty bark as I turned to look back at the island in the distance. The raft had already been set into motion by Cain with the use of subtle motor and navigation controls set in the center of the raft like a pole to holster a flag. We sailed over the waves.

Cain then sat on the edge of the raft, allowing his feet to hang in the water. I sat as well, and when I placed my feet in the water, the raft propelled us toward the island at a fashionable velocity. Cain looked at me, and I could almost feel his emotion about the situation. But then he took his eyes away and looked into the water, “What are you thinking about?” I asked him.

“I was just thinking about your dream of us having a normal life,” he looked at me again. “And how stupid it was.”

I looked past him and at the island, “Is he really there?”

“What difference does it make, Iam? It doesn’t change anything.”

“Maybe he can help us.”

“If the man has been here all alone for this many years, what would make you think he would want to help anyone?” He argued.

“If you think this way, then why are you here?” I challenged him, and he took his feet from the water.

“I don’t know,” and for a moment, his face was vulnerable and free from anger. But he snapped out of it and stood up. “Maybe the Scientist knows how sentimental you are and has attached a carrot to a string to lead the donkey. He wants you out of the way and you voluntarily complied with wishful hopes of meeting your daddy again.” Cain mocked. “Give me a break.”

I looked into the water at the various schools of fish swimming beneath us and near my feet. “Well, I know why I’m here.”

“Tell me why then, brother?”

I looked up at him, “I’m here to save you.”

“Save me? From what?” His anger returned, insulted, and I took my feet out of the water in order to stand with him. “Answer me, what are you talking about!”

“Cain,” I could see his anxiety rising. He had to make a decision, and he knew the time was coming. “We are on the same side, remember.”

“You can’t save me.” Cain shook his head. “There is absolutely nothing you can do to stop him.”

“Do you really believe that?” I asked.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Come on, you don’t think he gave me the same order as you? You don’t think that the Scientist ever approached me and said, ‘Prove your loyalty to me.’ He’s told me the same thing. He’s told me that, ‘Your brother is jealous… his jealousy will betray you… end him before he ends you.’ It’s the same spiteful rhetoric he’s tried to manipulate me with all these years since you joined Precinct Ground Zero.”

He looked at me, “Why are you telling me this now?”

“It’s the right time you know.”

“It’s the opportune time.” Anger hijacked control of him, and he started to pace back and forth. “You’ve been waiting to tell me that in order to use it for some advantage.”

“I never thought I’d have to tell you this!” He stopped his pacing and listened to me. “I’ve always known I can depend on you. I knew that our bond was greater than that of yours and the Scientist. I know what he offers you, but it is not authentic.”

“I’ve done everything for you! My whole life has been dedicated to you, do you realize that?” He silenced me. “Every waking day since I could remember revolved around Iam’s agenda; be at home with mom or working for the Scientist. And now I’ll have to raise your children because you can’t accept defeat.”

“I never got to thank you for all you’ve done.” I saw that we were closer to the island behind him. “You have every right to be upset, but you have to understand that I’m just trying to do what I believe is right.”

“Everything has been about you, and the worst part is, you were never there.” His eyes were burning red at this point. The sun shined behind me over his face and I watched the grave decision he chose at that moment. He raised his fists in the air and adjusted himself in a fighting stance, “Mom used to cry at night when you were gone and when you came home, it was like she’d seen the good shepherd himself. She would have me cleaning and running errands to prepare for your visits, but you are no savior. You are not human either - you’re a dysfunctional lab rat spreading your neglect everywhere you go. Look at the trail you’ve left behind for once. You have done no good in our lives. You saved those people because you were programmed to save those people, other than that, you deserve no further rewards.”

The raft swayed left and right over the water, but Cain stood his ground, “Cain, I’ve needed you and you have needed me. I am here for you.” I breathed.

“The Scientist has given me a chance to live my own life… a life free of you.” The island was approaching closer in the distance behind him at this point, but he was unconcerned. “Fight me. Best man wins.”

I shook my head, “I don’t want to fight you. I love you, brother.”

He was so engulfed in angry, there was no getting through. I was neglectful no matter the reason. I knew a part of him understood why I had to be, but it didn’t make up for the absence of someone you respect and learn from. I wished I could tell him I didn’t understand what I could do with my life until I met Iyla. I wished I could tell him how I didn’t know much of anything until I learned who I was.

“Fifteen minutes until mandatory evacuation. Please vacate the premises immediately.”

We were still over 50 miles away from the island, and the raft continued onward on autopilot. Cain finally took the opportunity to throw his first strike, a left jab which I easily dodged. “Come on.” He threw another jab and then a right hook that struck me in the face. I stumbled back, and as I did, the raft shifted and placed the artificial sunlight directly in my eyes and the island behind me.

Cain advanced to strike me again, and I was able to catch his fist in my hand and throw him away from me. He recoiled, and I could see the anger consuming him even more. He launched a variety of blows at me, and I played defense, protecting my core as well as my face, but I initially refused to strike back.

He panted to catch his breath after some time, but he never dropped his stance. He was relentless and soon I had to protect myself from an array of attacks he launched at me. He panted as we got closer to the island on the raft and he charged at me. I thought to dodge it and allow himself to fall into the waters, but that would only embarrass him further. I had to save him. Time was running out, and there was a lot at stake, however Cain took precedence. I wouldn’t have gotten so far in life without him. He always challenged me to be better. I allowed him to tackle me, rushing his shoulder into my core, and we both plunged into the depths of the ocean together. The raft kept on without us, and the schools of fish parted as Cain and I sank further below. I was able to shake him loose after some struggle underwater, and I swam to the surface. I figured he’d be close behind, and I was correct. I wasn’t sure, though, if he would have enough stamina to make it to the island himself.

I swam the remaining distance toward the island anyway. The raft had already drifted up on the western shore miles ahead, and the waves kept it from drifting back. The land was much larger up close and stretched incredibly wide, deepening the initial speculated capacity of the man-made ersatz of nature. I looked to the center of the island at the volcano encompassing 40% of the land. I figured that there must be a way out from the island since the Scientist expected a sole victor between Cain and I to walk out alive. I intended for us to leave together.

I neared the western beach, and I decided to perform the rest of my strokes underwater. I looked behind me to see that Cain had followed my example and was plunged under as well. I was much faster, and still, he never gave up. It’s what I always appreciated about Cain because persistence was his religion. He was my younger brother, and it wasn’t the first time he’d challenged me or tried to prove who had the most testosterone. He put me throw a whirlwind of tests when he decided he, too, would be a soldier, and I loved everything about it. He seldom allowed me to be soft on him, and in return, he earned my respect and admiration.

But as I swam underwater, the same specimen who had stolen my focus before, stole it once more. The Cnidaria: the boneless, brainless, glowing jellyfish floated ahead of me. It loomed and shone like sapphire and it was luring me in. I couldn’t stop the involuntary gravitational pull toward it, as if I was stuck in a trance. I heard Cain some yards behind me, but I didn’t mind. Once I was close enough to the jellyfish, I paused and reached for it. The creature reached for me too, displaying a translucent tentacle before me. My finger almost connected with its tentacle but Cain was able to reach me first and continued our fight.

We shifted forward past the jellyfish, and I led us up to the surface for air. I caught my breath, “Cain, stop this! Don’t you understand what this is?” But he wouldn’t listen and continued his fight with me. We gradually tugged at each other in the water and with the help of the growing ferocious waves we washed up on shore sooner than anticipated. We both stood up in the shallow parts, and Cain was still prepared for a fight.

“Fight me.” His clothing drenched in water and his back to the island, the sun now in his face. Though he posed, I could tell that he hadn’t much strength left. “Fight me!” He breathed once more, and he struck me again. I stayed open, enduring the pain I deserved. I had failed him before and so I endured the pain because I deserved it. But once I had enough, I dodged a hook and struck him instead in the rib cage. He winced from the pain, and was left open as I stuck him once more with an open palm to his third eye in his forehead.

He spat out with a mouth wide open and dropped down to a single knee in the water. I stood over him, prepared to strike again if I had to, but then I felt the sharp pain putting my body under distress, sapping me of my energy. It was an agonizing pain far greater than any blow Cain could have thrown at me. I couldn’t pinpoint the source because this type of pain usually came from my heart, but this time was different. Cain looked up to me and saw me fight through whatever it was, but I wanted to share with him, “This place… the Scientist’s world…” I looked down at the tentacles around my leg, attaching itself to my energy. It was the Cnidaria, the same jellyfish from before, “It’s a prison.”

I surrendered my stance, paralyzed by the immortal jellyfish, unable to move my body. Cain didn’t know what to do, and he looked afraid for once. He stood from the water, at least, and didn’t notice an old man springing towards us from behind him into the water. My consciousness was fading, and so was my vision. I could barely make out the newcomer’s face, but I knew that he was my father.

His beard was unkempt and his skin was dark like the pupils of the eye. He came beside Cain as my senses began to deplete and as my heart rate declined. The old man used a stick to knock the tentacles of the jellyfish free from my leg, and I fell backwards into the water. The old man caught me before I fully submerged, and Cain snapped out of whatever spell he was under and helped. They both carried me to land, out of the water and lay me on the sand. I lay coughing out bouts of water from the ocean, and Cain knelt by my side as I released a scream of pain. The aftermath was more painful than the initial sting. I felt my eyes roll to the back of my head and my hands remained pinned to my sides.

“He’s going into cardiac arrest. Step aside.” My eyesight returned for a moment as the old man pushed Cain aside and performed hands-only CPR over my chest. I could no longer scream about the pain, and my vision blacked away.

“Let me try!” I heard Cain return and somehow even through the excruciating pain I was under, it made me smile. He pumped my chest similar to the way of the old man’s, but it didn’t seem to work. I felt his hands over my chest and it felt like those of a child with a voice to match. I was slipping in and out of consciousness. “Stay alive, stay alive!” I heard Cain.

And then I heard explosions beyond the realms of the level containing the man-made island and ocean, out in the real world. I wasn’t able to stop the Scientist, or rather not yet. Now the world would know war again if they hadn’t already. But I was optimistic, and somehow the smile remained on my face. I imagined watching Cain, under the influence of his persistence again, trying to save my life, unaffected by the sounds of war. The whole of the facility shook, and still, he pumped my chest in hopes to get my heart back to a healthy rate. I tried to remain present, however my mind began to drift to a future of rebirth and renewal. I smiled more because I understood my purpose. Though my physical presence would be missed, my energy was eternal. I believed that the Scientist was a genius, but his methods were horrendous, and his reign would be limited. His demise would be through the hands of his own ‘creation.’

I could no longer see Cain anymore or the old man beside him. I could no longer hear explosions, or smell the sea, or feel the sting of the jellyfish. I thought of my wife, and my children and tears of joy filled my eyes because I had dreamed that they would be together. I thought of Alissa and the role she’ll have in the new world and in Gesu’s life. He would become exactly what Dr. O’Donnell wanted him to be and more. I knew my son would be prosperous because, in my absence, he had a family. I thought of my mother and the old man who had reemerged suddenly and then back to Cain. Maybe I could not save the masses, but I was able to save him, my brother. I thought of him when he was young and innocent. He was my best friend, and I recalled a time in the past when I told him so…

Cain was seven years old, and he had come with me to run errands for our mother. We sat on a train as we so often did, and I could see that he was bored. “Want to see something cool?” I asked him and his eyes lit up.

He followed me up a ladder on the exterior of the train car. “Are we allowed to do this, Iam?” Once I crossed above, I reached below to help pull him up, but he refused my hand and finished the task on his own.

I lay stomach first on top of the train car. “Let’s hang on here.” This time he accepted my aid and came onto his stomach as well. The train started again in motion, and Cain smiled and laughed at us moving through the fast winds. We traveled through countryside passages aboard the train, and we never let go out of each other. He was happy again and looked at me, “Iam, I want to be just like you.” He beamed, “I want to be a soldier someday, too, just like you and papa.”

“You can be anything you want, brother.”

“I know, but I want to be like you.”

“Or you could want to be like yourself,” I suggested.

“But I am not a soldier.”

“Maybe you are a leader,” I said, and Cain smiled. “Whatever you become, Cain, promise me this one thing…”

“What?”

“Promise that you will always do what you believe is right.” It was a huge responsibility for a young boy who was still learning right from wrong, but I insisted he learned his capabilities earlier rather than later, “Last night I had a dream, brother… a dream where my heart was failing, and you were looking over me-”

His demeanor changed, “What? Did I hurt you - why would I do that?”

I shook my head. “No, I know that you would never hurt me. I don’t know why I had this dream, but I want you to know now that I trust you. Although you’re my brother, I think of you as also a really good friend. You’re my best friend, and whatever decisions you make in life, even if I may initially misunderstand, I will trust your judgement because we will always look out for each other.”

Cain blinked and nodded his head, “I promise.” I accepted his vow.

It was getting late, and we were having too much fun on top of the train that we missed our stop and rode all the way until the end of the line. Once in the end, the conductor discovered us and forbade us to do such a thing again. We obeyed, but we were full of too much giddiness to take him seriously. That evening we would go home empty-handed, neglecting to retrieve the items our mother set us out to get, too tired after a day of fun. Cain rested his head on my shoulder and slept on the train ride back home. I cherished the moment because I knew that someday he would be a tough soldier. One who would help as many people as I would.

# Chapter 22

“It has begun.” Joe, whose name I learned from Alan, breathed while looking out of his window. He had something to do with what was going on.

I was distraught and from the looks of it, so were we all. Apart from Roy piloting the aircraft and Joe in the cockpit, the rest of us felt useless. Iyla held on to a crying Yarah and covered her eyes so that she could not see the horrid happenings below. However, she could hear, and what made it worse was that there was no certainty on the whereabouts of Iam and everyone else.

“We’re six miles out of the extraction point,” Joe acknowledged.

Though it pained me to see the destruction below, I could not peel my eyes away from the scenery. It was my 25th birthday, and I didn’t anticipate it to look like this. I remained in Alan’s arms, and we looked below at thousands of Ground Zero soldiers in succession traveling from the facility by foot at an accelerated pace. They were formally spaced and positioned in order to protect and marshal the inhabitants in the center of their formation, the Benevolent citizens. They, too, traveled by foot, matching the agility of the androids. There were more in existence than I initially thought. Hundreds of the superhuman race traveled to the same destination as my company, to the extraction point.

We had neighbors in the sky, the media outlets Alan and I tipped out monitored and recorded the happenings just as we’d hoped behind us. We didn’t know what was going to happen, and this would be deemed inconceivable if the world could not see with its own eyes. We also led a fleet of Boeing hovercrafts behind us, carrying hundreds more of the Ground Zero android soldiers. A smaller hover jet flew in range of our aircraft some yards in front of us suddenly. It was the same jet Iam descended from by parachute with Iyla and Joe before. I hoped that he was in it.

Iyla noticed the jet too and Roy followed it for the remainder of our flight. After some minutes, we reached our destination at a concrete extraction point. It was a cement helipad large enough to resemble a small airport surface, and it was raised high enough above the ground to suggest it could be lifted entirely. The jet before us descended and landed first, and I was eager for good news. We all were.

“You can park her right beside mine,” Joe instructed, and Roy obeyed.

Before we landed, the persons in Joe’s hover jet opened the aircraft and the first to exit was my Malamute, Jax. My heart lit up, and Yarah even exclaimed with excitement at his appearance, “Jax!” He leaped from the aircraft onto the surface and looked up at ours coming up next. Soon after Jax barked at our arrival, Gesu leaped onto the surface on his own. He laughed and played with Jax in pure bliss, healthily and well. I saw what Alan had noted before that Jax had become Gesu’s protector. Iyla wept at the sight of her healthy son, and as soon as Roy landed us, she opened the aircraft. She mouthed a sweet thank you to all of us, and ran out onto the surface with Yarah. She dropped to her knees and squeezed both her children together. Jax wagged his tail rapidly at the sight of Alan and I, and once we arrived, he licked us all over. We were joined by Roy and Joe and then Mary, who had an almost pleasant look on her face as she descended the stairs of the hover jet. She held onto the handrail, and Yarah and Iyla stood to greet her. Though she smiled, it began to feel a bit melancholy.

The perspective shifted the gravity of the situation with Dr. James O’Donnell’s appearance. He looked sternly over all of us before he fully exited the jet with an air of anticipation, as if expecting a round of applause. He descended the stairs, followed closely behind by his assistant. Iyla and Jax assumed their positions in protecting Gesu as the Scientist walked onto the surface. There was a new confidence about him, along with a ring he wore on the little finger of his left hand. He had achieved his pursuit, proclaiming himself victorious and you could see it in his walk.

I kept my attention on the hover jet, however, in hopes for a couple more arrivals, but the next and last to exit the aircraft was the armed pilot who flew the hover jet. Soon we faced the reality that neither Iam nor Cain would be joining us at the moment.

The media sources landed simultaneously instead. Both Joe and the pilot protected his grace, Dr. O’Donnell, from the various news anchors, journalists, and camera crew rushing to get a testimony. Alan and his father protected the rest of us from immediate questioning with powerful verbal assistance from Jax. Dr. O’Donnell held both hands in the air in a welcoming manner, accepting the media attention.

“Hear me, hear me,” he said over the multitude of chatter. They were desperate for a story, and one could venture to guess that Dr. O’Donnell was eager to sell them one, “Thank you in advance for listening… is this Live? All standing here have witnessed an untimely, unfortunate, outright egregious attack on creativity, productivity, and overall humanity. All who are listening now, thank you because I will never be able to explain the resolve of the forces responsible for the assault on the government-affiliated, Precinct Ground Zero facility where I was hired to conduct my work. After years of dedication, devotion, and service to my nation, tonight has left me in shock and utterly disappointed. Not only have years of research and progress been thrown into the fire, so have those of innocent lives. The assailants responsible have performed an act of social injustice and intimidation with the use of alien warfare yet to be approved by the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. I will do my best to answer any questions you may have, but at the moment, safety is paramount. We are subject to further acts of violence, and it has left me no choice but to defend myself and company since *their* technology is exceedingly lethal. The casualty list builds as we speak.”

The Scientist’s conviction was so flawless, I started to believe him myself. Though I was witness to his deceit and his own atrocities, I remained silent. I instead allowed myself to be distracted by the absence of Iam and Cain. If the Scientist was capable of raging war against one of the most powerful institutions in the modern world, an institution which he helped sustain, it meant that there were no extremes he wouldn’t take to taste the fruits of his labor.

The ground began to shake as the herd of the Scientist’s army neared closer just in time for the second part of Dr. O’Donnell’s dissertation. The media outlets turned their focus on the arrival of the androids and company, “Fortunately, my creations persist along with my greatest work… We are entering a new age of human consciousness… We are entering a new world order.” The android soldiers reached the platform, and the press broke out into a frenzy. He pushed the press away from him, ignoring their questions and chatter. Joe followed his lead, and with the assistance of the armed pilot they pushed the Scientist through.

The fleet of android-filled Boeing hover crafts remained in the air. The android soldiers arriving at the extraction point split upon reaching a few feet before the Scientist, to his left and to his right. Once at the center of the formation, the world exposure of the Benevolent citizens was captured on screen for the first time by the cameras of the press. The android soldiers advanced to protect the Benevolent ones and the media outlets adjusted themselves accordingly.

“Dr. O’Donnell, who are these people?” A Journalist with a red hat demanded, and it would be the first question to earn the Scientist’s response.

“Behold,” he raised his hands again, turning back to the cameras with the Benevolent citizens stopping close behind. Joe and the pilot stood by his side, but as he looked at the cameras, he realized he was missing something, “Wait.” This time the media group was parted by the android soldiers for the Scientist to advance between them. Iyla knew who he was after, and she and Jax closed in tighter around Gesu. Still, the Scientist approached and demanded, “Step aside.”

Jax and Iyla did not move until Mary placed a hand on Iyla’s shoulder. She took a deep breath and reluctantly surrendered her son into the temporary custody of the Scientist. She remained in place, and Yarah stood beside her as they watched the Scientist carry Gesu in his arms before the journalists and cameras.

Jax remained close to the Boy as the Scientist lifted Gesu in the air, “Behold… the Benevolent One.” The media broke into pandemonium again and their questions and camera flickers drowned out the then cry of the squirming Gesu. Jax barked and threatened any approaches, and I followed Iyla through the crowd in order to retrieve her son. The Scientist allowed him back to his mother and Gesu jumped into her arms. We covered him and led him back to our group. Jax watched over and followed us when suddenly yet another explosion set off coming from the facility miles away.

It would have blown me off my feet if Alan hadn’t hovered over me, protecting me from the violent aftermath of the nuclear bomb that had shattered the Precinct Ground Zero facility into smithereens over 40 miles away in the distance. The winds were agitated and wouldn’t calm, blowing dirt into unprotected eyes. I saw many around us fallen to the ground, except for the android soldiers and the Benevolent people who were strong enough to withstand the violent fissures. Some of the camera crew and media tools had flown away.

The Scientist kneeling, looked at his home, his work, and establishment dissolved to the ground. But his mood did not falter. Instead, he used the explosion in his favor. He smiled with his eyes, and with the assistance of his vanguard, he rose from the ground. We watched him turn his attention back to the Benevolent people. No one knew what to expect next, but the working cameras and crew followed the Scientist’s every movement. The Benevolent citizens looked fearful. However, they seemed to follow the Scientist with blind devotion.

I was afraid too because that explosion meant that whatever and whoever was left over in the facility were caput. I looked around at our group, and emotions had taken over all of us. I had only wished Iam and Cain would arrive, but it was beginning to look like a lost cause. We all grieved together in silence, afraid to address the elephant in the room. No one wanted to admit the undeniable truth that stood in place of Iam’s absence. Both he and Cain were missing, with no guarantee that they would be able to escape the facility in time or not. Gesu cried hysterically, and his mother rocked and swayed him as best as she could, but she grieved as well. We all wanted to cry the way the Boy had. We gathered around Iyla and her children once more, demonstrating our support in the dark time. The explosion grounded us further in the current reality that there would be war. I thought of my parents and everyone else who had no idea what was happening. Suddenly the world felt so small and our lives insignificant.

I saw the looks in Roy and Alan’s eyes and I could almost hear their internal thoughts. No one knew exactly who was responsible for the bombings just yet, and our group was just like the audience who tuned in to the live happenings in the Mississippi River. We were meant to sit back and watch the show put on by the Scientist, and I brought the cameras. Though he was heavily armed and protected, there were just as many established forces in our nation alone with the same artillery and more who could stop him, I thought. His arrogance was spiraling out of control.

The Scientist stood before the Benevolent citizens with arms lifted once more as something took his attention in the sky. We followed his vantage point and saw the fleet of aircraft containing androids hovering over the extraction point, separate in the center to allow the entrance of a reflective metal war jet to travel through. Once the war jet was close enough to the extraction point, we were able to spot a man dressed in black gear suit and a face mask to match.

“Iam?” Roy exclaimed, and I hoped that he was correct.

The man in black jumped from the war jet, and I was so distracted by the possibility of the newcomer’s identity I didn’t know how or where the war jet went next. He descended over us with retractable metal gliders from the utility backpack he carried behind him. He landed on the vacant end of the extraction point base, and the press pushed through our group to get first coverage of the newcomer’s arrival. He stood in place as the cameras rushed toward him, but he kept his gaze in one direction, in that of Dr. O’Donnell. We all watched, and Iyla stood forward a couple of feet to the familiar energy of the man in black. The Scientist remained in place with his guards and assistant backing him. The Benevolent people and the android soldiers watched on obediently as the man in black removed his face mask.

“Uncle!” Yarah exclaimed, and we all looked onward with an almost restored hope. Yarah escaped from the group and pushed forward to Cain. Jax barked after her but remained with Gesu.

“Can you state your name, sir, and if you’ve just exited that explosion?” a journalist held a microphone before Cain’s face, but he ignored questions.

He only focused on Dr. O’Donnell, who had a smile in his eyes again. He pushed through the cameras and crewmen just as Yarah made her way to him. He picked her up from the ground, and she held herself on his shoulder. His presence granted us a fleeting feeling of stability. Since it was apparent he had been loyal to both his brother and the Scientist, one could only hope he had made the right decision.

He carried his niece through the crowd, and when he made it to our group, he replaced Yarah on the ground next to her mother. He smiled at her, “Stay together.”

He looked up from his niece, and his demeanor changed accordingly. He was stern and professional again. It was obvious, too, that he had changed. He appeared somewhat older and wiser, and more reliable. But his visit was brief as he carried on, solo again toward the Scientist. The press followed, and once he was a foot in front of Dr. O’Donnell, he saluted him.

“At ease,” the Scientist said, and Cain relaxed.

“Sir, with your direction, I’ve completed your mission,” Cain said, and I was shaken. I figured his mission had something to do with Iam’s untimely absence.

The Scientist studied him and accepted the statement as truth, “Very well.” He said, and after a beat, Joe made room to allow Cain to rejoin the ranks of the Scientist.

“What mission?” Alan asked. I found myself curious and disappointed as well to see Cain on the side of the Scientist again.

The thought that Iam was no more had returned. Cain continued, “Unidentified powers are responsible for the disturbance and catastrophic nuclear bombing on American soil that we’ve witnessed today. As we speak, more displays of firepower are approaching and you’re advised to evacuate the area immediately.” The aerial android units adjusted their formation above us in the sky as Cain delivered the news.

I turned to see a tear falling, almost running from Mary’s eye. The android soldiers advanced, now protecting the Scientist and us of his entourage. They gathered around us, scaring the children. Gesu began to wail again as his mother coddled him. I made sure Yarah stayed close this time, too, as the soldiers escorted us off of the cement extraction point and onto the dirt instead. The ground began to shake again. Once every person was removed, the cement rose from the ground entirely and just in time because the firepower Cain mentioned was arriving in the sky.

Incoming military forces arrived like beams of light, and the Ground Zero soldiers operating the aircraft above us launched missiles at the intruders kicking off the first public battle in the Scientist’s war. The military forces were that of the United States government, but the Ground Zero operatives were set to kill. The soldiers on the ground raised their weapons at the fleet of government forces entering the zone. The press broke out in chaos and was blocked off and not granted permission to enter underneath the extraction point surface.

The assigned few android soldiers led the rest of us under the surface of the raised cement. The Scientist was, of course, led in first with our group to follow because of Gesu. We entered a dark tunnel that laid out left and right underneath the ground. It was unclear exactly where the tunnel led, but Cain seemed to know what he was doing. Once all of the Benevolent citizens entered after us, the android soldiers sealed off the entrance and we were all confined in the underground. The ground began to shake once more as the extraction point surface descended over us, closing us in. I noted the underground structure’s purposeful objective in protecting us from the initial bombings of the battle because we were all able to breathe. We traveled through the tunnel en route to the safe zone.

Sounds of the battle above penetrated the metal walls of the tunnel and I grew tired of my silence, “Listen, we have to stop the Scientist.”

Roy overheard me as we picked up pace through the tunnel. “But you’ll have no chance to stop him, if the androids, Joe or Cain don’t interfere.”

“I may not have to worry about that,” I lifted a hand and pointed to my little finger. “There’s a new gold band around Dr. O’Donnell’s finger that I can’t stop obsessing over.”

“What of it?” Alan asked.

I looked around for Mary, but she traveled by hover chair now along with the Scientist. “I wish Mary could tell us… I don’t know why but I think it’s possibly the object Dr. O’Donnell needed from Gesu’s heart. It is a ring, but it might be a switch.”

“Actually, a key. It was mentioned earlier, and I forgot about it.” Alan announced.

“All the same, if you can’t get a hold of the Scientist, how are you going to get a ring on his littlest finger?” Roy poised.

He had a point, “Well, did you see the look Cain gave us?”

“Maybe you know better than us, but he looks to be in lieu with Dr. O’Donnell,” Alan said.

“It’s possible that you’re right, but I have doubts based on what Cain’s done so far,” I said, and I noticed Iyla just before us with her children. “He’ll help. He’s looked out for Iam in many ways. His outward behavior has been a little unorthodox, but there’s no denying overall where his loyalty lies.”

“Loyalty can be bought. He could outright have sacrificed his brother in which to save their wives and children.” Roy argued. “Which could be the best thing to do? Iam was not the one who jumped from that plane. From the sound of it, Iam lost. He said he was going to stop the Scientist, well, he ain’t here, and the Scientist is still going… If there is to be a civil nuclear war on the rise, one must pick a side…”

Alan and I both looked at Roy, “Dad, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying exactly what you’re interpreting.” He said forthrightly. “This whole coo doesn’t sound like no overnight plan. He’s plotted this tactic from every angle possible, I’m sure of it. The government’s given him too much space and open reign. At this point, he’s probably three steps ahead of anyone opposing him.”

“So you’re going to join the ranks of the Scientist too?” I asked, stunned. “Inconceivable. That man is a treacherous narcissist.”

“Be that as it may, young lady, he’s a genius.” Roy pointed out. “I’ve watched him excel and surpass many obstacles and adversaries for decades now. His creations ensured the existence of mankind. Hell, even the reason many of us are here is because one of his most prolific recruits saved our lives. We’re here by some kind of premeditated design.”

“Spare me the reasoning, Roy. What constitutes this man to decide the fate of this nation and our future?” I said.

“Nothing justifies his decision but one thing; he is manifesting the change he wishes to see in the world. And somehow, he has enchanted the masses and probably scores more… You were the ones to alert the press, weren’t you?” It was rhetorical, and there was no debating it. “Whatever plan the Scientist has cooked up, you’ve helped him in more ways than none. You attended a recruitment dinner hosted by the Scientist, poised as a coincidence. You probably helped him influence a lot more deliberate rebels who would turn away from the government in hopes of a better world built by Dr. O’Donnell. Subsequently, we all have been an advocate for this new world order.”

“Dad, stop, please.” Alan interjected, but it was useless.

“Look around you!” Roy stood his ground. “Look at Project Benevolence and the world you just witnessed. The Scientist is realizing himself to be the architect of the future, and so far, his portfolio has been far from tawdry.”

“That’s something we can agree on,” I said sincerely. “Nevertheless, there are many ways to stop a man’s tyranny without joining his ranks.”

“Spoken like someone who’s never seen war before,” Roy said plainly.

“Dad, why do you keep fighting this?” Alan asked.

“Because the sooner you kids learn that our reality is less about right and wrongdoings and more about the complacent personal desires of the self-proclaimed distinguished, the better you’ll be.” Roy asserted. “I’ve seen what the man can do, and so far, we’re alive. I say that to say I am loyal to us. If we can devise a plan to stop the Scientist, if we can stop him, then I’m with the shits. Until then, don’t get in over your heads and make any rash decisions based on your emotional morality. There’s a lot at stake here, and one wrong move could be the end for all of us.”

Gesu began to cry again, alarmed by the android soldier passing by us at an advanced pace. “That guy Joe… he was in on it the whole time.” Alan shook his head. “We all heard him radioing something in, he bombed those reinforcements after receiving the coordinates.”

“I think so.” Roy agreed.

“That leads me to my initial point,” I said as we seemed to be nearing the end of the underground metal tunnel, “Without compromising our lives and those of the others, if we can get our hands on that ring, it might be able to gain us some kind of leverage.”

We came to a halt. The Scientist, Cain, Joe, the armed pilot, and the assistant stood some yards in front of us, followed tightly by Mary and the rest of our group. There were nine androids that supported us from within along with the flock of Benevolent people, all confused and fearful behind us. The battle raged on above us, and we reached our next destination in front of doubled armored metal doors.

Joe admitted us in one by one into the safe zone, “Quickly, quickly.” He urged. For such an extravagant plan, the safe zone dome was quite uncomfortable and cold. It was hollow and save for the sole electric globe suspended from the ceiling, it was quite dark.

“What’s happening?” I asked as we passed by Joe, but he ignored me.

“The whole island is getting nuked,” Cain answered instead. “We’re safe down here until it’s over.”

I looked at him, and I had an odd feeling that we had an understanding. “I want to know the truth. I think it’s time we get filled in on what’s happening!” Everyone stared at me, including the Benevolent people. “How long are we going to be here.”

“Indefinitely!” I turned around, and the Scientist greeted me from his hover chair.

“So what does that make the rest of us? Your prisoners? You think you’re doing us a favor trapping us in here without a word?” I said.

“If you want to venture back out, be my guest.” The Scientist threatened. The Earth above us shook again. The androids were fighting aggressively in the sky and on land. “As for the rest of you who want to live and see the bright future that will immerse from this ugly, cold war, remain here.”

I stared at the Scientist for what seemed like an eternity, and he stared back. Neither of us was going to let up. “Where is Iam?”

“Yes,” Iyla chimed in. “What have you done with my husband this time?”

The Scientist adjusted in his hover seat, “Iam and the other Benevolent ones are capable of free will just like the rest of us. He chose his side.” Dr. O’Donnell glared at me now. “And its time you choose yours.”

I looked around at everyone else, but no one said anything. I looked to Cain and realized he was staring at the same gold band that caught my attention before on Dr. O’Donnell’s finger. At that moment, I envisioned horrible things. Iam asked for my help, and though I had done my best, I felt like a failure. I stared at the band and saw nothing was in my control. Alan stood by my side, even though he seemed to have faced the reality that I refused to accept.

Roy was right in suggesting Dr. O’Donnell was a few steps ahead of anyone against him, but I still felt the need to hold on to my might. The same might that I re-sparked in Iam when he, too, began to feel hopeless before. I felt that there must be someone to stop Dr. O’Donnell. No one wanted to jeopardize the lives of others as much as their own. It was very apparent that Dr. O’Donnell would dismantle any rebel disruption of his cause, and would make an example out of anyone. I thought about Iam, Gesu, and then my parents, “What about our families?” I thought about the casualties and innocent people unaware of the pending war.

He cleared his throat, “What we need is a global cleansing, and you are among the fortunate ones to survive what is to come.”

“Enough of your poetry! What have you done?” I demanded.

Cain stepped on the side of the Scientist again, “He’s proved himself to be the ultimate destroyer.” Cain’s confession continued, “Share with them, tell them about your true *tour de force…* your achievement in releasing the most powerful nuclear component all around the world.”

I looked at him bewildered, “Around the world?”

The Scientist stood now from his hover seat, “I’ll gladly share with the group. With the help of my partner at the time, we were able to achieve two phenomenons that we kept explicitly between us. I created a compound so powerful, any nation would sell their best piece of land to possess it. It is a gas that is basically Nuclear oxygen,” the Scientist smiled, proud of his achievement. “With the help of stealthy friends, I’ve released this oxygen out into the world in hopes to terminate the masses. It won’t be enough to rid them all but it’ll be enough for super nations to blame and attack one another like before, and we’ll be the only party with the proper technology to survive as they wipe each other out.” Iyla bounced the Boy up and down in her arms to quiet him because the Scientist scared him. “Then we will take over this Earth and treat it much better than our fellow predecessors.” He approached the Boy, and Jax gnarled. “I had wished that Iam could be part of this, but Gesu will make an even finer leader.”

I was flabbergasted by the thought of nuclear oxygen that was sure to be detonated at the will of the Scientist. More destruction could be heard above and without thinking, I reached for the Scientist, “Ahh!” but I was too slow. An android stopped my advancement and pushed me back into Alan’s arms.

The ground shook violently as the sounds of an aircraft crashing into the Earth were heard above. We all fell to the floor and relied on the support of the metal walls to keep us from being buried alive. The children screamed and some of the older recipients of the shock did as well. Dr. O’Donnell took the opportunity to lift his hand and twisted the ring around his finger. The ground continued to shake like an Earthquake, along with the rising of temperature inside the underground metal compartment. The dome went pitch black and the source of the heat began to illuminate instead in the darkness.

# Chapter 23

The Scientist sat across from me at a game of chess, twirling a glass dagger around with his left hand. I was ten years old, and I had just learned that my father, who had been deemed missing, was pronounced deceased. The Scientist thought it was meaningless to grieve, instead he steered me to channel my energy into a purpose to fight.

I did my best but my eye was focused on the Aquarium that resided behind the Scientist. I was fixated on the creature the Scientist once described to me as the Cnidaria. He told me that the creature is feared by humans but we came from the same creator. He even used the jellyfish’s sting to power the hearts he engineered. I asked him, “If the two sides are from the same source, then why are they often fighting with one another?”

He kept his eyes on the board and responded, “There was a war a long time ago between the sides, and every millennia it repeats itself. These battles are as essential and natural as the seasons of Earth. Though the two sides resemble each other in many ways, neither knows who they are and from where they come.

“My greatest influence once composed an equation that solved the mystery of what we humans and all other matter are: E = MC^2. E stands for energy, and is equal to physical masses moving at the speed of light.” I made a move on the chessboard and it paused the Scientist’s offense. He held his chin up by hand and pondered his next move. “Because of my birth, the Earth is my astrological element, and because of my father, J. Seymour O’Donnell, the Mirror Maker, I learned how to bend and manipulate Earth, particularly metal, at an early age. However, I’ve been infatuated with oceans since I was very small. Similar to our human bodies, most of the known globe is encompassed by Water, and for that reason, oceans hold my true fascination in this world. Water is energy and has the ability to take on any shape of a vessel it inhibits. All life depends on water just as much as we depend on the Sun, and we have an unlimited supply. It is eternal and has the ability to nourish you or consume you. Its magnificence is reflected in the Waves it produces: constant energy fissures pushing and pulling to aid you or destroy you. Following the previous equation, one can conclude that the Wave, made of water, is the ocean… and so are we. So if the two colliding sides in the war are indeed from the same source, water, then the battle that they fight, constantly, is... already won.”

At the time, I did not understand why the Scientist spoke about energy and how it was relevant to battle. It took time to understand that a person in everyday life displays tremendous levels of energy, and I was evolving with the philosophy that energy was not an external entity. Every movement was the currency of energy of which I am; and since I am energy then I have infinite access to the source. It comes in currents or waves and some last longer than others. In any case, it is forever constant.

We played a game of chess periodically and often the Scientist would drift into streams of consciousness. I would study him more than I did the board. Often I allowed Dr. O’Donnell to win our matches, and I did it in a way to uphold his pride. I learned that he too wanted to be understood in some capacity, and mental stimulation was the only way he knew how to exits. Even with all of his creations and discoveries, he felt like a slave to a cause not his own. Each time we played, he shared with me a great deal of his mind, and it affected his strategy.

“I suffer from eleutheromania and I’ve learned nepotism is the downfall of humanity, so I will never have a son.” He made a threatening move on the board. “… Under the prism of optical highlights, I am inspired by the aesthetics of the Atlanteans; but in real life, I loved an ordinary mortal so much that my eyes were only directed at her.”

Still, he remained present and disciplined in his moments of rhetoric. I learned to enjoy his thoughts because it allowed me to learn the way the Scientist thinks, awarding me to understand his strengths and weaknesses. If energy equals mass traveling at the speed of light, then I understood at a young age that the Scientist saw me as an equal. I had a lot to learn, but I saw the way he played the game of chess with his emotions, and I played from the perspective of curiosity. I was deeply curious about what my opponent would bring to the table, not about defeating him. His emotions were linked to his ego and he wanted to be victorious. I recognized the man I sat across from and realized his own limitations would ultimately be his downfall.

I was fourteen years old and I was preparing to execute my first solo mission. The night before, I took a swim in the Modulus Ocean because I had so much adrenaline anticipating the mission to come. I thought to exhaust myself enough in order to rest, and I swam for the first time all the way, against the currents, to the desert island on the western shore. There I met my father for the first time since his case had been classified as missing. He was alive, and he shared with me truths Dr. O’Donnell kept from me. He had been hired by the CIA after his reputation in the United States Navy. He was introduced to the Scientist, and together they would soon engineer and create as a team. They developed and produced on behalf of the United States while holding claims to their own passions. My father, Dr. Amun David, would aid Dr. O’Donnell in producing Nuclear Oxygen, in addition to a new, impenetrable metal strong enough to withstand even the rays of the burning sun for a significant amount of time before melting. It was a metal sufficiently able to withstand the impact of even a nuclear explosion. This metal, along with the oxygen, was kept top secret and would only be used for exclusive occasions. Any android soldiers built with the metal were not for sale to the CIA and were kept entirely for what Dr. O’Donnell plotted long ago. The metal would be used for developing his own intelligence, weapons, and ultimately an elite army. They called the metal Titanium X, and only a few knew about it. A spy was discovered in the ranks of Precinct Ground Zero. Dr. O’Donnell and my father were confronted by the government on the grounds of illegal activity. But the spy hadn’t discovered the oxygen or the metal, he instead learned of the enrollment of Project Benevolence rather. Subsequently, my father took the blame by council of the Scientist. He agreed to forfeit his work and progress and surrender his rank. He was to be put in a foreign prison but the Scientist hid him on the island at the end of the Modulus Ocean instead.

“I haven’t breathed natural air in four years,” Amun said. “And even more so since I have seen my family.” He hadn’t had direct contact with many for the sake of jeopardizing his location. He was weary and desolate, but he continued to create. He made me vow to keep our meetings private until the time was right…

“I was able to hack into the mother computer, and I have radar readings of the contaminate. According to discord history, it was intended for the sky battle, but it has been moved! Maybe by the spy, you’ve mentioned. Your mission is the same, Iam, stop the explosive.”

The Titanium X armor wrapped over every inch of my body, and it took a great deal of my energy to wear. I focused all I needed to see it through and more. I focused on my breath.

I landed on the ground some yards from the battle in the sky after my father dropped me off in the same electric war jet that Cain ejected himself from. It was a jet Amun built with Titanium X, and we used it to blast our way out of the facility.

I arrived at the cement platform and ran along the path from the extraction point above the underground dome the Scientist and company hid. Initially, I aimed to stop the bomb in the sky, but Amun’s radar was accurate, the Nuclear Oxygen was in another detrimental location.

I was aware of everything happening around me. The android and government soldiers fighting in the sky began to overflow to the ground. The facility exploded miles behind me, and its impact was felt regardless of the distance. With the Titanium X armor Amun designed, I was able to accelerate past the incendiary waves beaming from the explosive, desecrating all existence incapable of protecting itself.

I ran to the surviving group of press personnel trying to escape the island but was held back by winds preventing their progress. They held onto their respective air crafts, and I leaped about thirty yards into the sky to capture a woman who had got sucked up in a whirlwind. I brought her back to the ground and helped the remaining press associates to escape. I watched them fly off as the explosions continued due to the battle raging to the west.

“You’re near,” Amun said.

I scanned the vicinity with the special op goggles part of the helmet. “Where is it? I can’t seem to pinpoint it.” I said.

“It’s showing to me you’re close,” Amun responded. “Cain, do you copy?” But the connection was interrupted.

“Maybe it’s there!” I remarked, and the ground shook underneath me. Scores of air crafts crashed to the ground on both sides, and I continued my search. The Scientist thought he was in control, but his plan had been hijacked.

“Underground,” Amun said.

“You’re right!” My goggles flared signaling the target I was looking for.

Time was ticking. If the Scientist used the key he removed from Gesu’s heart, he and our friends and family were partial to joining the casualty list as well.

“Iam… do you… copy?” Cain’s voice traveled through the transmitter.

“Cain!” But the connection was cut short. I arrived above the underground metal dome.

“Iam!” Cain called out before the signal dropped again. I dug my hands into the ground covered by the Titanium suit, and I was able to clutch onto the metal buried some yards below using a magnetic feature of the armor.

“Iam, get down there!” Amun called out.

I lifted the top of the container with the help of the jet pack of the suit opposing the resistance of the metal, but it wouldn’t budge. Instead, I slammed a metal fist through the container, creating a hole in the ceiling. I was able to penetrate it and peer through the large hole I created at all the familiar and fearful faces inside; my wife, my children, and the spy. The Scientist had already set the bomb ablaze, and I was able to pinpoint the culprit leading a suicide mission.

I forced myself down over the nameless pilot who escorted me to my family on behalf of Joe before knocking him on the ground in hopes to intercept the growing fiery glow spurting from his chest. The spy began to scream as the Nuclear Oxygen burned his insides. Through my goggles, I could see the incendiary, and I moved quickly to conceal it. I extracted a container from my armor and held it over the energy growing from over the spy’s chest. No one moved near me, nor did I think to look over at my loved ones whom I meant to protect in the instance. I focused on holding my strength because the Nuclear Oxygen had successfully sprawled from the spy’s chest, and in a second, he was lifeless. I was able to contain the energy enough, so it did not affect anyone else.

“Iam?” The Scientist questioned. “Is that you? You can’t contain it!”

“I can try,” I said, trying to close the container shut. But the radiation was only growing more and more, which opted me to apply more pressure. “Get out of here!”

“Iam?” I heard Iyla.

“Papa?” I winced at Yarah’s voice.

I looked over to Iyla reaching for me, “Iam, please! “A tear shed in her eye, “We love you.”

“I love you,” I said as I struggled with the energy. I tried to keep it firmly under the container, but it began to lift me off of my feet even with the weight of the armor assisting me.

“Iam!”

I heard them all scream for me, but I could no longer resist the impact of the bomb. I closed my eyes and focused on the energy threatening to push through me. One wrong move and everyone and everything I knew sprawled around me could be no more. The opposing force felt like that of a rocket, thrusting violently from Earth, and I adjusted to accept the blastoff, with my body backing the container holding the energy.

The temperature was rising drastically, and I began to sweat under the armor. Cain ordered a score of the android soldiers to assist me in controlling the energy that succeeded in fully lifting me from my feet. But they only slowed down the inevitable. I ascended in the sky above the underground pouch that I had exposed. I soon ordered the android soldiers that were lifted too to shake loose of me because their weight eventually jeopardized my grip on the container over the energy.

“Iam, you have to let it go too,” Amun spoke through the transmitter.

“Not yet,” I said and continued to ascend with the explosive gas.

The battle in the sky was coming to a cease. The government was retreating as I flew past a league of Boeing AH-111s filled with android soldiers. An auto feature of the helmet placed a protective shield over my face as I passed the clouds.

“You won’t be able to control it if you go any further! The oxygen sustainability level is insufficient in that armor.”

“If I release it now, everyone will still be exposed to the radiation. Their chances of health are better the further upward I go.”

“My son…” Amun said.

I looked down at my loved ones below whom I could no longer make out. “Thank you for helping me, Father.” I said.

“Iam,” Cain joined. “You don’t have to go any further, come back down now.”

“Brother, thank you for everything.” The blast contained continued to lift me higher.

“Iam, let the bomb go!” Cain said as the energy grew brighter and larger in the container.

The energy thrust me through the atmosphere, and I no longer had full control of my body because of the velocity I traveled. I felt myself slicing through the ozone layer and out into space. The Earth was just below, but still, I waited for the right moment to release the explosive.

It took all my focus and energy to turn my body to where my back faced the Earth, and the nuclear Oxygen redirected me back towards where we came from, then, at long last, I set it free.

The explosion struck me viciously, and I watched the freed energy grow exponentially into a grand orb of light. The light show destroyed anything soluble in its reach, and though a beautiful sight, it accelerated my descent back to Earth forcefully.

I descended from space and shot back through Earth’s Ozone layer. I fell so rapidly that I felt the swarm of heat form around my armor. Gravity was heavy and I had no more strength as I fell through a dark sky. I didn’t know where in the world I was and if I’d ever see my family again, but at least they were safe, for now.

“Iam… can you hear me?” Amun said through the transmitter. I had no strength to reply, and he received his answer through my silence, “You’ve done well, son.”

“Iam… Iam, do you read me?” I heard Cain and smiled… it was the last muscle I could move effortlessly at the moment.

“He’s gone, Cain… he’s gone.”

I felt myself plunging through clouds, cooling off my armor. I closed my eyes and focused my remaining breaths on my family…

# Chapter 24

Iam brought about a light none of us knew we would experience. The lot of us stared up into the darkening sky as Iam propelled into outer space with the miraculously contained Nuclear Oxygen. We watched the massive, bright explosion in space and felt our respective emotions for what had transpired so quickly. We officially lost Iam. We came to the consensus that even a man of Iam’s stature, with the aid of special armor designed specifically to combat nuclear radiation, survival was still unlikely. The explosion got so bright that eventually, we all had to turn our sights from the light. By the time it was over, we saw the Scientist escaping into Joe’s aircraft, with the help of his assistant and Joe. Cain coordinated the androids, and the Benevolent citizens like a great conductor, and all obeyed.

Alan and I held onto each other as Roy helped protect Iyla and her children. I looked back up at the sky as the light finally ceased, along with the battle being fought. The remaining light in the sky from the sun continued to set, and there was no trace of Iam’s remains. I thought maybe his body would descend from the sky, intact from the explosion, but it was wishful thinking. Iam saved all of us, and in the end, it cost his life. His wife was a widow, and the Scientist lost his most prized soldier. I was so engulfed in the aftermath I could not fathom what Dr. O’Donnell would do next.

The android soldiers quickly led the Benevolent people into yet another underground tunnel, but I could not determine exactly where they would be escorted to since Cain pushed us in our secured hover crafts above the cement extraction point. Our group stayed close together around Iyla and the children since they had just lost their father and our dear friend. We all were in a state of silent grieving. Gesu slept in his mother’s arms as Yarah and I sat on either side of her in the cabin of Roy’s hovercraft. Jax snuggled beside me and Alan sat in the cockpit with his father as he followed Joe’s aircraft. We had no choice but to comply with the direction of the Scientist because of what we had just witnessed. At that point, the side we were on would have to be proven in a court of law by the government’s stance on guilty until proven innocent.

Cain ordered us to be hidden at a lake house that Joe lent to Iam’s family “…until things blow over.”

“What about my wife?” Roy said.

“And my parents?” I asked.

Cain sighed, “Get them to the hideout with urgency.”

It was close to midnight, and none of us had slept, except for the Boy recovering from heart surgery in the midst of all the madness. Most of us were still at a loss for words, unable to verbalize our new reality and what was to come. Before I met Iam, I had a relatively normal life, and now I was standing in between two sides of a Nuclear War, a war the United Nations swore an oath would never happen again. All major powers vowed to discontinue further development of nuclear and atomic construction in a treaty written by the King of England. Every country wealthy enough contributed their alliance to the Treaty, but there were loopholes no one dared to address. It was public suspicion that Russia and North Korea would continue to develop as they rebuilt their tethered nation. The Scientist’s notion of provoking conflict between neighboring countries was indeed plausible.

Alan reached for my hand, and I accepted just as Gesu began to stir in his mother’s arms. I studied the soft yet powerful presence he exuded, and suddenly he became someone of great importance in my life and I had only just met him. Someday he’d learn that I knew his father, Iam, by divine intervention or happenstance, and I’ll tell him how much he loved him. The Boy had grown thus far without a father, but it would still affect him the way it was affecting Iyla, Yarah, and even Jax resting at my side. We were all exhausted and had become a large new family through the devastation. Despite the circumstances, everything felt right, considering we were still alive. If only Iam could have joined. Iyla cried on my shoulder and she kissed the brow of her children. I looked at Roy piloting us in the aircraft, and I considered what he could possibly be feeling. I was grateful I was accompanied along with him, Alan, and Jax.

We arrived at the hideaway lake house where Iyla and Gesu recently resided. Joe awaited our landing and saluted Roy with his mechanical arm upon arrival, granting us amnesty into his home. Joe worked for the Scientist, it was confirmed, and he urged Roy to stay put at the hideout and let his wife be delivered there instead. Roy refused, and Alan thought we should go with him.

“I’ll take him, you two can stay,” Joe said, and I felt hesitant. “Our images have been assimilated, the less in numbers we move, the better.”

We entered the home as Roy and Joe took off. It would take only two hours to and fro, but it was apparent that time was of the essence. Roy climbed into Joe’s hover jet, and I noticed Mary on board. She waved as she sat beside her nephew, James O’Donnell. Joe agreed to pick up my parents as well. Under the circumstances, Alan and I would have no choice but to trust our parents would be okay in Joe’s care, and we watched them depart.

There was no word from Cain and his whereabouts at the moment. He and his wife were the legal guardians of Yarah, so we expected their arrival at the hideout as well. We stayed close together in the spacious living room to wait for the remainder of our families. We dared not speak or move too much. We had the verbal assurance of our safety from Joe while at the same time dealing with the afterimage of a nuclear bomb near exploding before our eyes. Alan and I called my parents and warned them of Roy’s excursion to Chicago and that he would pick them up to bring them to us. They were confused, but I asked them to trust me, and they complied.

Iyla bathed the Boy in one of the many bathrooms of the house, and I also retreated for a shower. It was cold because I was in a state of shock, similar to the months prior after waking up from my car accident. But then it made me think of how much responsibility I had then. Alan came and held me and assured me that Jax was guarding the house. Once we were able to recuperate a bit, we rejoined the others. Poor Iyla was so tired. Alan and I offered her time to retreat for herself. She surprisingly accepted, and we found food in the kitchen to feed Jax and the children as we awaited the arrivals. Tending to the children made me remain positive for their sake. I couldn’t imagine growing up without my father. At the moment, I yearned for my dad’s protection and to think Yarah and Gesu were feeling the same broke my heart. This time allowed Alan and me to see ourselves in the light as parents again despite our previous loss.

After an hour, there was a knock at the door that sent Jax into a frenzy. Alan answered the door to Cain and his wife arriving and Yarah, who had been particularly quiet, ran into Cain’s arms. Just as before, he would rise to the occasion to be her father figure. His wife carried in their own young daughter, and the children got to know each other. Iyla rejoined, and Cain congregated the adults but pardoned his wife, who attended to the children. I was growing tired of the waiting game because our parents hadn’t arrived yet, and I felt anxious. It had been enough time for their return, and with the growing tension, none of us were emotionally adept to handle any further disheartening news of immediate casualties. It was unbearable enough with Iam gone.

I focused on better thoughts as I had before, but Cain shared a video from a man named Federico Gonsalves. He was the man mentioned before by Iam but his role was unclear to me, “Who is he?” I asked.

“My father,” Iyla said as the video began through the virtual projection feature of Cain’s smartphone.

“… it will be worse than before. Hiding underground and waiting for vegetation to regrow in a timely fashion would be a waste. For the time being, however, stay inside and avoid major cities. Please be safe and learn how to survive what’s to come. To my daughter and grandchildren whom I have yet to meet, I love you, and I will see you soon.”

Other than his relation to Iyla and her children, his relevance was unknown to me, but there was no time to question because the next video message had begun. It was from Dr. James O’Donnell himself, “I’ve had to pivot, and thankfully Iam saved the day. He was a great soldier and he will be greatly missed. Because of him, I reiterate my previous statement: I will not be stopped. Due to the efforts of my allies, colleagues, and myself, I’ll see this cause through. I will wipe away the atrocities of the previous mankind.” The video ended with the camera frozen over the Scientist’s hand where the same ring as before resided on his little finger.

I could hear the sound of a hover jet landing outside. I looked out of the closest window to see the lights of Joe’s hover jet breaking through the darkness. I wanted to run out to see our parents, but a new video had begun on Cain’s smartphone, and I could not turn away. Footage of the battle we witnessed live played, audio-less. The video flickered to another slide of a parade celebrating Red Flag Day in Tel-a-Viv when suddenly a stage exploded, wiping out everything in a seventy-five-mile radius of the Nuclear Oxygen. I screamed as the video flickered to another slide of the aftermath of a nuclear explosion in Moscow, Beijing, and then Sidney, Australia. My parents and Alan’s entered just in time for the next city. I held onto my mother and father, and we all agreed for the children not to see the repulsive reality unwrapping before our eyes. Joe, Mary, and the Scientist were absent in the hideout and Roy suggested they’d move to a more secluded location.

“Dear heavens, be with us,” Roy said as the video continued displaying ruins in Paris, London, Casablanca, Lisbon, Chicago, San Francisco, New York, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, and many more that had all been subject to the Nuclear Oxygen.

Iam’s triumph was short-lived. I looked at the Boy who had entered with Jax. He stared at the destruction in the video, and none of us turned him away. He had an important role in the Scientist’s plan, and his steering of leadership was imperative. I believed it, too, and I started to feel a new hope. I didn’t understand the feeling because even Iam could not stop what was to come… yet, I still had faith.

**The End.**

**To Be Continued**