



ascension

Daniel Weisbeck

ASCENSION

DANIEL WEISBECK

[DJW BOOKS](#)

Publisher, Copyright, and Additional Information

Ascension by Daniel Weisbeck published by DJW Books, www.danielweisbeckbooks.com

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PREFACE

Ascension is a novella that takes place in the universe of the book series *Children of the Miracle*, winner of the 2021 IndieReader Discovery Award for Science Fiction Novel.

In a dark future, humanity is at the brink of extinction after a global environmental catastrophe awakens a deadly virus, killing billions of humans. Those who remain, live isolated behind the walls of three Sanctuary cities across the Earth: the Sanctuary of Europe, the Sanctuary of Americas, and the Sanctuary of Asia.

When the FossilFlu virus reappears inside the Sanctuary of Asia's walls, the threat of another pandemic will force the city's governing body to take extreme measures to try and protect the last of human life.

Ascension is a prequel to the Children of the Miracle Series.

CHAPTER ONE

LIZA FLINCHED as the needle pricked the inside of her left arm. Rose-coloured liquid raced up the tip of the tiny clear cylinder. The blood thickened, an instinctive and futile effort to heal its stolen body.

“There we go,” her nurse grinned an almost human smile as she pulled the syringe away. The android was a new model the Government introduced as part of the Ascension Program. Female in shape, her blue unibody construction was seamlessly covered in a flexible rubber-like skin. She wore a grey nurse’s uniform with a single orange flame embroidered on her right chest and the word Dignity sewn in white thread below.

“Almost done. Isn’t that exciting?” the android said, pressing a sterile patch of cotton against the pin-sized dot of blood on Liza’s arm.

“Exciting?” Liza murmured in disbelief, turning her anxious eyes to a message board hanging on the wall over the nurse’s right shoulder.

The large digital display lit in luminescent colours was projecting a multidimensional looping video. A field of golden grasses swayed in a gentle breeze, surrounded by dark blue jagged mountains in the distance. Evening sunlight caressed the tips of the long thin stalks and haloed the flying insects hovering over the grassy landscape. Scrolled underneath the picture, white words in a black box read: *Duty with Dignity. Let us help you help others.*

Placing a small adhesive bandage over the cotton patch, the nurse turned her back to Liza and marked the blood-filled vial. “That is all now. Please wait in the lobby. We will have the results...”

Liza stood, peeled her sleeve down her arm before the android could finish, grabbed her purse, and walked out the door. The hall smelt of antiseptic. Grubby streaks left by heavy traffic lined the lower part of the otherwise pristine white painted walls. Her mind went fuzzy for a few seconds. Bright florescent lights overhead dotted her glossy eyes. Suddenly, the corridor felt as if it were getting longer, stretching out in front of her. She tightened her grip on the bag clutched under her arm and quickened her step.

Almost skipping, she sped past the check-in counter as a young male receptionist stood. He said something. Waving his arm, he tried to get her attention. But she was off, racing through the packed waiting room. Worried eyes, terrified eyes, wet eyes—all watched her, knowing their turn was soon to come. Her throat closed in, holding back tears as she ran through the double glass doors, past the chanting crowd outside.

“Stop the culling,” the protestors sang in repeated unison from behind chipped and worn cement barriers. Her eyes avoided them.

She fumbled in her purse while dodging through rows of vehicles. Having found her transport key, she pressed it tightly in her hand, alerting the vehicle of her speedy approach. Pulling on the handle, the hatch opened readily, and she jumped inside, quickly closing the door behind her. The demonstrators’ voices softened. Not gone, mind you. But tolerable. Like a fading headache.

A floating display lit up over her dashboard with a holographic image of her transport vehicle glowing green.

“Hello, Liza, are we going home?” came the male voice of her virtual assistant (SIVA) from the vehicle speakers.

Silence followed his query. Liza sat still, staring forward, unblinking.

“Is everything okay?” the assistant asked. “Your heart rate is elevated.”

A single tear slipped out of the corner of her eye and washed down her pallid cheek. She inhaled deeply and let out a long jittery breath.

The shouting outside her car had stopped. The protestors stood around aimlessly, mingling as if discussing something as benign as the weather while waiting for their next target to enter or leave the clinic. She hated them. Their pointless protests. Where were they when Amendment 10 was voted through?

As the minutes passed, her mind drifted into a cloudy numbness. She was like a bird in a cage looking out from the shell of her body. The detached feeling was marked by a blank stare forward and a small bead of spittle gathering in the corner of her open mouth.

Ding rang an alert on the vehicle display, giving her a start. She finally blinked.

“You have an incoming message from Dignity,” said her assistant.

Something moved in the back of her mind. A memory came forward. Something about a message – yes, *it all started with a message*. She had been watching one of her favourite archive videos—the one about the ancient rain forests. A time when animals roamed through lush undergrowth. When water poured over rock cliffs. When sunshine glimmered rather than burned. And trees, so many trees. *That’s right*. She had been watching a video of the world before the Scorch, before the pandemic, before the damn message from the Government interrupted her show.

This is a special announcement brought to you by the Department of Health and Security. Amendment 10, The Extension of Eligibility for Ascension, has passed through council by an overwhelming majority today, changing the age requirements for testing. Effective immediately, all citizens of the Sanctuary of Asia forty years and older will now be required to test for active gene immunity to the FossilFlu. Citizens with negative immunity results will be invited to participate in the Ascension program for all humanity's health and security. This is a necessary step to avoid a second epidemic and an unnecessary burden on our health facilities.

Liza had to think about her age. *I’m forty-one*, she reminded herself. “Am I...do I have to...what the...” Her face drained of colour. *How in the hell did the Amendment get changed?*

Amendment 10 was initially introduced to extend mandatory immunity testing from seventy-years of age and higher to sixty-years of age. The sudden

change to forty made no sense. Citizens in her age group still had a thirty percent chance of positive immunity with repeated gene treatment. *No, that can't be right.* She must have misheard the message.

“Rewind and replay announcement,” she commanded her virtual assistant.

Liza leaned into the floating video display listening intently. There it was. They had said, “...*forty years of age or older.*” She heard it right the first time. Her hands trembled. *What does it mean?* Of course, she knew what it meant. But asking the question delayed the answer. What it meant was – she would have to go to a clinic within the next two days and be tested for immunity resistance.

“Excuse me, Liza,” interrupted her assistant from the dash of her vehicle. “Dignity requires notification that you have received and opened the message. Would you like to listen to the message now?”

Liza gave her head a little shake and wiped her damp chin with a harsh brush of her hand. Giving a heavy, uncertain sigh, she said, “Open message.”

“Hello, Liza Lee. This is Dignity Services Limited. You have opted to receive treatment and medical information from our clinic through encrypted messaging sent directly to and validated by your virtual assistant. We are sending you this message today regarding your recent visit to one of our facilities. Before we go any further, I would like to remind you that Dignity Service Limited is a fully authorized affiliate of the Sanctuary Government Ascension Program. You can access a copy of our full terms and conditions through your assistant who has been sent the file log with this message.”

The voice continued. “Citizen Lee, we thank you for taking your mandatory FossilFlu virus susceptibility test with Dignity. We are sorry to report that activation of the immunity gene M4 is negative. Your results have been filed with the Department of Health and Population. It is recommended within the governing guidelines, and for the benefit of humanity, you schedule an Ascension as soon as is convenient. Voluntary participation in the Dignity program makes you eligible for the Government’s Friends and Family Grant, so you can rest assured those you are leaving behind will be well taken care of.”

“Voluntary? Right,” Liza scoffed bitterly.

“We understand this is a difficult time. We hope to make this transition as

beautiful as possible. There are four packages you can choose from here at Dignity. The first option is fully funded by the Council of the Sanctuary. The next three packages offer a menu of choices for your going away ceremony and final resting compliments. Please call us within the next twenty-four hours to schedule an appointment and discuss your Ascension. If we do not hear from you, we will notify the Department of Health that you have neglected to respond. We are certain we can help you leave with the Dignity you deserve.”

The voice finished to a profound silence. Liza’s shoulders slumped forward as her chin dropped to her chest. It was the result she had expected. No surprise there. Tests across the city were coming back with the same results—negative activation of the synthetic immunity gene. So high were the numbers that the public had become sceptical of the gene cure. Conspiracy theorists claimed the entire program a fake, an excuse to legitimize the Ascension program.

It did not matter either way. Fake or real, the program was supported by the politicians and backed by the public. And the rules were clear. Once you were tagged, you had to comply.

The message from Dignity repeated in her head. “Friends and Family Grant,” Liza whispered in disbelief. “Another bogus government program meant to make us feel better.” *Who in the Sanctuary had real family anymore?*

Liza, like many women, struggled to get pregnant. Years of intense solar radiation after the Scorch had reduced fertility in both men and women to frighteningly low numbers in the Sanctuary of Asia. So low was the birth rate that the Government was forced to approve a Population Assistance Program allowing extracorporeal pregnancy by growing foetuses outside the human body.

But population growth was the least of the Government’s concerns when the FossilFlu virus returned.

The victim, a fifty-year-old man living alone in Old Town, died within twenty-four hours of contracting the disease. Rats had brought the virus back into the heavily guarded city. Government action was swift. Hospitals went on alert. Entire buildings were converted to emergency medical facilities. Strict lockdowns and curfews ground the Sanctuary city to a halt.

Tensions rose, and soon the public became restless. The Government had to

show progress and phase one was a mandatory vaccination scheme. But the new synthetic immunity gene was rushed out under false hopes. When the older generations displayed negative results for gene activation, doubt in the program spread.

Then, to the horror of the public, another infection was reported. Mass panic ensued throughout the walled-in-city. Within days the leaders of the Sanctuary introduced the Ascension program. The highly controversial scheme aimed at removing the most vulnerable in society to ensure a repeat epidemic wouldn't spread like wildfire through the gated city. The Sanctuary went silently into shock.

"Isn't it terrible? Asking people to kill themselves," the citizens would say publicly with exaggerated gasps.

"How did it come to this?" others would answer, offering equally bewildered expressions, all the time, knowing exactly how it *had come to this* because nobody said anything. Their lack of objection was an agreement, a pact with the Sanctuary leaders to allow Ascension to pass. That is how it happened.

Over time, the daily death tolls became a standard part of news packets. "*We honour and thank these dutiful citizens for their sacrifice to humanity,*" the announcer would start in a sincere voice. "*Two hundred and thirty-one brave citizens have ascended today.*"

Day after day, the numbers rolled out, faceless and nameless. Slowly, the counting of the dead became nothing more than noise in the background. Sanctuary life had moved on. Until Amendment 10.

"Did you want to reply to Dignity?" Liza's assistant asked.

Liza contemplated. Several times she started to respond but cut herself short. Something in her belly was holding her back. Then, that something started rising, becoming a lump in her throat. Her face twisted, and her eye swelled. A tremor shook her body from head to toe. She gripped the edge of the dashboard with white knuckles and let out a long-trumpeted scream until her face turned purple. Inhaling deeply, she released another uncontrollable belting roar and sunk into herself.

A sudden knock on her glass window startled her. Turning to her right, she

found a young woman standing outside the vehicle wearing a pinched expression.

“Hello?” the woman said in a semi-muted voice.

Liza shook her head and flipped her hand, telling the stranger to go away. The woman, no older than twenty, with smooth light brown skin, piercing blue eyes, and wearing a clear face mask, refused to leave.

“Please, open your window.”

Liza straightened herself, pulled down on the edges of her white top, and ordered her window to open. She hated herself for agreeing to talk to the woman. The glass purred until the window came to a stop halfway down.

“Are you okay?” the girl asked kindly.

“Do I look okay,” Liza snapped, her voice raspy from screaming.

“Did you just get your results?” the nosy girl pressed on. “It’s okay. You don’t have to do it. We are here to help you.”

“Who are we,” Liza asked bitterly.

“Us,” she pointed to the group of sign-holders, who were all now staring at their exchange. “We run a safe home for those who wish to stay alive.”

“Oh really,” Liza spit the words. “And do you have a cure as well?”

The woman’s face crinkled. “I’m trying to help you. Give you a safe place to live out your life.”

Liza knew what the woman was talking about. Shields, they called them. Buildings for vulnerable citizens who were shut away forever, with no hope of leaving. This was the only alternative to Ascension. Basically, a coffin of a different kind.

Liza’s voice became something even she didn’t recognize – hostile and aggressive. “You know they will come for you.”

The woman snapped her head back. “What?”

“You think because you are young and can bear children, you are safe? They won’t stop until every possible carrier of the disease is gone! That is all of us. Every last human in this godforsaken Sanctuary.”

“That’s not possible. Someone needs to live,” the woman replied, shaking her head as if the thought had never occurred to her before.

“Do they? Why? For what?”

“I think you’re in shock. Why don’t you come and talk to us?”

Just then, three people exited the clinic. A man around fifty-years-old, ghostly-white, was being escorted by two others. They rushed him past the jumping signs and rhythmic shouts of the protestors.

The woman standing outside Liza’s vehicle turned towards the commotion and squinted. A young male protester standing at the barrier’s edge was frantically waving his hand, capturing her attention. With a determined finger, he pointed at the terrified patient, now making his way through the parking lot. The gesture was an explicit instruction to move on from the old woman in the vehicle who was not interested in what they offered. The woman turned back and met Liza’s eyes one last time, a final silent offer to talk.

“Go. Just get out of here,” Liza said and ordered the window to rise.

Running across the lot, the protestor approached the new patient. The old man’s two friends looked horrified at her approach. Anyone caught consorting with government protestors risked being flagged in the city’s Keeper policing system. Liza watched as the two strangers waved the approaching girl away violently and blocked her access to the old man.

The afternoon slipped by with no sense of time. Liza sat motionless in her vehicle, unable to think, move or act in any capacity. Staring out through half-closed lids, she witnessed the incomprehensible scenes that played out in front of her. One by one, the patients filed out of the clinic, pale-faced and shell-shocked. A few were surrounded by the friends who had come with them.

Friends. The thought pulled at her. *When was the last time I talked to Henry? Yesterday, that was right.* Henry had called just before the Government’s announcement.

“This is unbelievable,” he had said. “The Amendment won’t pass. It can’t pass.”

“What choice does the government have, Henry,” she ironically argued on

behalf of Ascension. “The older generation are the most vulnerable. If the virus starts to spread through the city again, they will fill the isolation wards. After that, the disease will be out of control.”

“We always have a choice, Liza. Where does it all end and when?” The miniature 3D holograph of Henry shook his head in anguish.

“That’s exactly what they are trying to avoid. Having it all end.”

Later that day, when the Amendment was announced, including the updated age for eligibility, Henry immediately called back. Liza did not answer. She did not dare. That would mean the broadcast was real. Her assistant played Henry’s message live as it was being recorded before she could stop it.

“Liza, please pick up. Oh my, this can’t be,” he kept repeating, sounding more and more exasperated. “I didn’t see that coming. Forty-year-olds? How could they do that without consultation? Please, Liza, pick up.” There was a slight pause. “I am coming over,” he said with conviction. “You’re not alone, Liza. I’m here for you, and I’m coming over. Oh my,” he exclaimed and ended the message.

Good old Henry. Lucky Henry. He was thirty-nine years old. One extra year to live. Maybe they would find a cure by then. That was highly unlikely. It had been thirty years since the global pandemic, and still, they had nothing that could stop the FossilFlu. But maybe for Henry, it would be different. After all, discovery can happen in a moment. Then again, so could death. Her death happened in a moment. One second, she was watching the broadcast, then the next, she was dead. Well, as good as.

Call Henry. She made a mental note while the last of the protestors drifted away and the evening set in. The parking lot cleared. Liza could not bring herself to move. As night fell, a hovering display in laser lights blinked on, covering the front of the now-closed clinic. *Duty with Dignity*, it read. Images played of smiling people, laughing people, holding hands, and walking into a soft white light where they disappeared poetically. The reality was more like screaming people, wide-eyed, terrified people, wet-eyed, sad people, getting pushed into a coffin. “Nothing happy about that,” she muttered angrily.

A full day of indecision and denial was exhausting. Liza’s brain shut down.

She let out a long yawn, and her lids grew heavy. Sleep consumed her, no matter how much she fought it.

Rain pellets thumped against the vehicle roof. Liza stirred, slowly waking. Her car seat was laid back and stretched out into an uncomfortable cot. She sat up.

“What time is it?”

“Six in the morning,” answered her assistant.

Liza combed her fingers through her thick jet-black hair, pulling the shiny locks away from her face. Stretching, a painful crick pinged in her neck after lying in an awkward position all night. A memory of a dream she was having faded. Something about her apartment: she was anxious about cleaning it. Getting it tidy. But no matter how hard she tried, she kept finding bits out of place.

Her stomach growled. She briefly thought about ordering tea and biscuits from one of the bot-driven drone services that roamed the city streets. Then a strange realization hit her. “What’s the point of eating anymore,” she said out loud, followed by a mystified laugh. Slowly, her perplexed expression twisted into a red-cheeked rage. *Idiots. They are all idiots*, she screamed in her mind. *Pretending life was normal – no, not just normal, but getting better! Lies.* Her anger grew. The Sanctuary was not a city. It was a grave. A living gravesite for the last humans on Earth, waiting to die—an epitaph to civilization. *Why would I want to stick around anyways? For what?* she argued with herself. *Maybe it is better to be off now than suffer another horrible epidemic.*

At this very moment, the first time she admitted to herself that her death was imminent, her life flashed before her. Images raced past her mind’s eye like a whirling carousel. Colours, smells, and sounds profoundly and vividly stirred her senses as if they had only happened moments ago. Further and further backwards, she spun dizzily, witnessing her life in reverse. Until, like a shank stuck in a moving wheel, the flashbacks were brought to an abrupt halt by one memory in particular.

Liza was nine. Her parents were already dead, having caught the virus in the first wave. A fact that likely saved her life. Put in government care, she was already an institutionalized part of the Sanctuary before they turned people away and ultimately closed the city gates forever. She lived in the Dormitory with the other orphans of the pandemic. It was morning. Blue-skinned nannybots were busy waking the children and escorting them down to the cantina for breakfast. Liza was tall for a nine-year-old and was put in a room with three older girls around twelve and thirteen. Kosu, a nervous girl, thin of frame and with a languid disposition, slept in the bed next to Liza.

“Kosu?” Liza tapped her friend’s shoulder.

The girl lay still under her sheets.

“Nanny will be here soon. We need to get ready,” Liza continued.

“Why,” Kosu quietly replied, refusing to break her hypnotized stare into space.

Liza’s face crinkled. “It’s breakfast time,” she offered factually. “We always go down to breakfast now.” Her voice went up on the end as if both a statement and question at once.

A drop of water slipped out of the corner of Kosu’s eye and slid sideways down her indifferent face. “Just go without me.”

Liza remained silently watching her friend, unsure what to do or say. Kosu’s eyes suddenly came to life, grew wide, and her brow stitched together in anger. “I said, go!”

The unexpected outburst gave Liza a start and had the opposite effect desired. Now she was scared and unable to move, even if she wanted to.

Kosu bolted upright. “You always do what you are supposed to. Don’t you!” she screamed in Liza’s face and stormed off to the toilet.

Liza stood waiting for what seemed like an eternity in her memory. But Kosu would never come out of the washroom that morning. When Liza returned from breakfast, Kosu’s bed had been changed. Dressed in fresh sheets and a pillow, it was as if nobody had ever slept in it.

That afternoon, during Liza’s daily viral scan, she asked the male nurse about Kosu. He shook his head, making a *tsk, tsk* noise with his tongue against the

back of his teeth and said, "It's probably for the better."

This was not the memory she would have hoped for at the end of her life. But it was understandable, for it was prophetic. The words: "*You always do what you're supposed to*" and "*It's probably for the better*" rang like bells in her head.

"I don't want to die," Liza suddenly confessed in a barely audible voice, sitting in her vehicle alone. The truth overwhelmed and seized her with a convulsive shiver down her spine. "Please. I don't want to die," she repeated louder, almost screaming at the Dignity nurse in her mind. Her eyelids welled up, and streams of tears slid down her cheeks as she began an uncontrollable sob.

Outside Liza's vehicle, the first of the protestors returned and assembled at the clinic entrance.

After a few long minutes, when her tears were spent and her body was no longer able to hold itself up, she fell back into her seat. She thought of Henry again. His tender and heartfelt kisses. His deep voice soothing. *Had they already contacted you, sweet Henry? Had they already restricted your movements just for being my friend?* It was highly likely. The Government wasted no time when a citizen was tagged for Ascension. Their family and friends, and sometimes, neighbours, were notified and placed under strict lockdown until the ascension ceremony. Entire neighbourhoods had turned on those who refused to ascend.

Poor Henry. He would be waiting for her. She could hear him now. He would tell her everything would be okay. Tell her he didn't mind being in lockdown if they were together. No, she could not do that to Henry. He had his own future to worry about now.

Liza stared at the clinic doors. Unknowingly, she had pulled her fingers into tight fists pressing hard into her lap. She loosened her hands. Shook them out. Took a long deep breath, followed by a slow controlled release. *I can do this. I have to do this for Henry.*

"What time does the clinic open?" she asked in a voice so resigned, so contained, a stranger might think she was simply scheduling a check-up.

"The Dignity clinic is open now," her assistant replied.

“Tell them I’m on my way in.”

CHAPTER TWO

HENRY FORD SAT in his apartment and listened to the news feed with wide, terrified eyes. His heart stopped. Or sped up. He was so disoriented he couldn't tell. An image of Liza, her large dark brown eyes, hair so black it was almost blue, and her beguiling smile came into his mind instantly as the broadcaster announced the sudden and unexpected change in age qualification for those required to test for immunity resistance to the virus. Something from his stomach rose up into his throat, and a sour sick taste filled his mouth.

"Call Liza," he bleated into the air, jumping to his feet and starting a rapid pace back and forth in his living room.

"Liza is not answering the call," his virtual assistant calmly responded.

"Leave a message: Liza, pick up. Please. Oh my, I didn't see that coming... I'm coming over. End Message."

Henry grabbed a long overcoat hanging by the door and slipped out of his building onto the Old Town's twisted cobblestone streets. Flipping his hood up over his permanently coiffed burnt-orange hair, the tick, tick, tick of rain falling onto his polyurethane rubber coat echoed around his ears.

Zoom! Beep, beep! Hover crafts descended and rose busily into the narrow passages between the shop fronts and bustling crowds of citizens in usual daily business. Old Town was at the heart of the Sanctuary. Its twisting mid-evil pathways were the arteries where history, culture and remembrance were carved into the cold, sterile world of glass and steel skyscrapers that made up the much larger walled city. Before the Scorch, before FossilFlu, Old Town was nearly

abandoned. It was only a dot on a tourist map for those visiting the largest and most advanced metropolis on the Asian continent. When the pandemic hit and the disease could not be contained, the Sanctuary of Asia was forced to build a 140-foot barrier wall around its borders and close its citizen's inside while billions outside were dying. The throngs of desperate humans who were lucky enough to have gotten through the gates before they closed were distributed around the city and assigned living quarters. Old Town, once again, became a living community. Henry and Liza had grown up as orphans in these crooked streets.

Theirs was not an immediate affection for each other. Well, not for Liza anyways. Henry was a quiet man. It wasn't that he didn't have his own thoughts, no Henry had plenty of ideas. Great ideas at that! It was just that Henry also had a stutter, which he developed in childhood after witnessing the agonizing death of both his parents and a sister to the FossilFlu. To avoid embarrassment, he preferred instead to keep his ideas to himself. And so, day after day, he would open the small door cut into the heart of a larger door at the front of his tea shop, stand behind the old wood counter quietly, and wait for Liza to come in. Like clockwork, at nine, she would walk through his door for a fresh cup of his unique home-brewed tea. Henry's heart would speed up, his cheeks would turn red, but all he could ever muster was a thin nervous smile, and if lucky, without pause or repetition, a clear "Good morning" and "The usual?" at seeing her.

He had convinced himself she felt the same for him long before she had spoken the words. His conviction was because she returned each morning to his tea shop when she hadn't needed to, as food and drink replicators offered a multitude of tea simulants. Of course, there was always the possibility she just couldn't live without his home-grown *Camellia Sinesis*. His was the real thing, not picoparticle derived replications. But acknowledging this alternative truth would only break his heart and keep him up in the long hours of the night pining for unrequited love. No, it was much easier to believe she was shy, in love, and didn't yet know how to express herself.

Then one day, no different than any other, in a moment Henry would never forget, Liza stayed longer than usual. She lingered with tea in hand and browsed

with her eyes at the many glass jars in various sizes that stocked the shelves behind Henry and his counter. The containers were filled with dry leaves in different shades of blacks to reds to greens to whites.

“I always get the same tea,” she pondered out loud, her eyes pointing over his shoulders. “What’s in the other jars?”

Henry felt his muscles go rigid and a few beads of sweat form under his hairline. He wanted to tell her everything he knew about tea. Just let the words spill out and keep her standing in his shop for hours. But his tongue had grown thick and dry, and a slight spasm in both corners of his mouth were familiar tells that speaking would reveal the percussions of his disability.

Liza’s eyes drifted to his face. Her pinched brow gave way she saw his discomfort, and to Henry’s horror, she misread his intentions.

“I’m so sorry. I’m taking up too much of your time,” she quickly said.

“Na...na...na...nooo,” Henry forced out.

Liza’s cheeks burned red, having forced Henry into an embarrassing situation. But instead of excusing herself and leaving, she stayed. Tilting her head, she offered a friendly smile and waited, quietly and patiently.

Henry took a deep breath and started slowly. “The di...di...difference is in the fermentation. They are all the sa...sa...same tea plant.”

Liza’s eyes, kind eyes, understanding eyes, remained locked onto his, and she nodded politely as he continued to explain how the darker, redder leaves were fermented longer. The tea she, in particular, enjoyed was a lighter, green tea, requiring less fermentation. As his mouth moved more fluidly and his voice grew more confident, the singing in Henry’s heart drowned out his fear. A heavy stone had been lifted off his shoulders, and his words became feather-light, floating out of his mouth without resistance for the first time in his remembered life. For Henry, it was a miracle. For Liza, it was the beginning of their friendship.

Within weeks their conversations had grown longer. They shared tea, then lunch, then dinner and eventually their beds. Henry’s stammer had all but disappeared when around Liza. This he took as proof they were meant to be together forever. He was planning on asking her to move in until the damn

Amendment 10. Oh, dear, dear, Liza, he thought.

Henry's face washed pale as that horrible sick feeling in his stomach returned, thinking about Liza Ascending. His pace quickened through the crumbling neighbourhood. Liza's apartment was in a skyscraper several city-blocks outside of Old Town. He could get to her building in forty minutes and thirty-two seconds at an average pace on foot. Today, he was hoping to make the journey in less time. There was no point hailing a hover cab. City restrictions on vehicles to conserve energy meant cabs were far too expensive for such short trips, and it would be rerouted to service longer requests even if he tried to find one. No, this morning, he would have to be quick on his feet. And the heavy rain and busy walkways would not make it any easier.

Henry dodged, swiped sideways, and skipped on and off the black mirrored streets as he sped down the city blocks and weaved through the pedestrians dressed in their long polyurethane capes and transparent face masks. *There is a pending pandemic, people!* He wanted to scream at them. *What are you doing out here? Go home and get out of my way!*

His growing frustration and rage incited a sudden hatred for everyone around him. They were the problem: citizens who had grown tired of being locked inside their homes and refused to sacrifice their 'freedom' to save the most vulnerable. They were the reason Liza was called to the clinic, called to death. *How selfish you all are! How grotesquely inhumane the last of humanity has become!* He screamed in his mind.

He glanced down at the time displayed on the communicator band he wore around his left wrist. Twenty minutes had passed. So much for hurrying, he scolded himself. He would need to be more aggressive. Jumping in front of a tall and broad-shouldered man, his booted foot sent water splashing up on the stranger's trousers.

"Hey! Be careful, you idiot! And where the hell is your mask!" the tall man bellowed.

Usually, Henry would have turned back and profusely apologized. But not today.

Oh, just shut up! You have no idea what is at stake. You think getting a little

water on your trousers is the worst thing that can happen. Try losing your partner. How would that feel?

These thoughts only ran through Henry's mind and never became words spoken. Instead, the worst retort that Henry could muster was a "Sorry" over his shoulder without turning to give the man the courtesy of a face-to-face apology.

As Henry rounded the final corner and had Liza's building in his sites, he lifted his wrist and spoke into his bracelet, "Call Liza."

"There is no answer. Would you like to leave a message?" Henry's assistant said.

Henry did want to leave a message. Many messages, in fact. He loved her. He couldn't live without her. He would find a way to protect her from the Ascension. But he knew there was a good chance Liza had left for the clinic. Liza was not one to procrastinate. Things seemed to eat at her if unfinished. Her apartment was always tidy and in order. Her appearances set the standard for primmed and punctual. And she never, not once in the time he had known her, missed an appointment. He could only hope this would be the first time.

Breathing heavily and nearly doubled over with an ache in his side, Henry yanked the hood off of his head to present his face to the security panel outside the entrance of Liza's building. "Liza Lee," he cried into the black glass panel embedded in the wall.

Liza's virtual assistant, having recognized Henry's face and voice, responded, "Liza is not home, Henry. She told me to tell you she will call you later. I'm sorry to have to share this news with you."

Henry felt the wind squeezed out of his lungs. *Why? Why is she cutting me out now?* Throwing his back against the building wall, he slumped down, knees bent, and dropped his face into his lap.

"I'll wait," he said.

"Henry, it is not advisable that you wait outside her building. Your whereabouts will likely be monitored and restricted now that Liza has been called to test for Ascension. That is the government protocol for friends and family until Ascension is complete. If you stay outside, you could be picked up by the Keepers."

“Fa...fa...fa...FUCK THE KEEPERS!”

“Very well. I will leave you now. Let me know if I can help you with anything further.”

Henry laid his face on down, cheek to knee, and began the long wait.

Henry blinked himself awake, unaware he had even fallen asleep. Something of dawn was breaking through a heavy mist. Sunrise was always a slow and dim event under the clouded protection of the Sanctuary’s artificial biosphere. The permanent pall over the city perpetually blocked out the scorching sun, recycling the rarest of Earth’s gifts, freshwater. Henry’s head was soaked and covered in beads of dripping rain. His thick orange hair, reminiscent of a lion’s mane with a heart-shaped hairline when dry, lay flat on his head and darkened to something near a deep reddish-brown. The moist flesh of his cheeks hid his tears, so he was only aware of them once they tickled the edges of his nostrils and top lip. *How long have I been asleep?*

His dreams were heavy on his heart, but the images had all but faded. Something of his mother, was it...or his sister? Either way, he knew this feeling all too well. It was the scar of grief and abandonment cut into his brain after all of his known family had died. Now Liza was next. How unfair the world was to Henry.

He lifted his left arm and glanced at the time display on his wrist band. It was six in the morning. He pulled himself up to standing by pressing his back against the wall and crawling upward with stiff legs. Cupping a handful of wet hair, he pulled his saggy bangs back away from his forehead and leaned into the digital panel at the entrance of Liza’s building.

“Liza Lee.”

“Hello, Henry,” came the disappointing assistant’s voice. “Liza is not home. But you know that. You have been sitting outside all night.”

“Yes,” he replied despondently. “I thought maybe, while I was asleep or...”

“Liza wants you to know she is safe and will talk to you soon.”

“Does she know I am here?”

“She did not ask me about your location.”

“Where is she?”

“I can’t say. Not without Liza's permission.”

“She is at a clinic.”

There was an artificial silence from the assistant.

“Tell her I will not leave until she comes home.”

“I will send the message. Is there anything else I can help you with? Would you like me to order a coffee or tea from the delivery drones for you?”

“No. Just send her the message, now, please.”

Henry waited against the building. He found it odd nobody had come in or gone out the entire time he had been holding his semi-vigilant watch. *Had the whole building been put into lockdown?* His mind wandered through the residents he had come across in the halls and the lift since meeting Liza. Many were young and below the new threshold for Ascension. And anyways, he wasn’t aware of the Government locking down an entire building in the past. But he didn’t expect the government to bring the threshold for testing immunity resistance down to forty years of age either. *Fuck the Government.*

The Sanctuary’s Government, once run by the people, for the people, had become increasingly secret. He didn’t like it. Not one bit. But what could he do? They had their unsanctioned police force called the Keepers. The new department was run by military-trained professionals and armed with the only weapon in the city: a new android regiment also called the Keepers. The terrifying humanoids, with silver-white hair, and metallic skinned bodies, had super-human strength and enough AI wits to adapt in real-time. No person, indeed, not one of ordinary means and usual physical disposition like Henry, was a match for the Keeper’s androids. The new creatures had marched out of the Government’s cryptic Oasis labs, a complete surprise to the public, and patrolled the city, ‘protecting’ citizens by enforcing the ever-changing pandemic rules.

Henry suddenly felt the eye of the city on him. Liza’s assistant could be right. It was dangerous for him to be outside without permission because he knew her. Getting caught now and forced into a penial lockdown would make

seeing Liza impossible. Henry's heartbeat raced. *I've got to get out of the open! I've already been out here too long.*

Peeking around the corner of the building's entrance, he looked cautiously up and down the street. Pale morning sunlight bled through the misty skyline, thinning but never entirely erasing the bright multidimensional holographic billboards that decorated the building fronts. Already, people were spilling out into the city roads. Hovercrafts zipped up, down and back and forth with greater frequency. The streets were busy enough that he could blend in. If quick, he would be home in less than an hour and wait for her there. But it would be much faster and easier if he could somehow get into her apartment.

"Can I help you?" came a female voice from behind Henry, giving him a start.

He turned to find the double glass doors that led into the building slid open and a silhouette of a person, small and slightly round, covered in a long cape and deep hood, standing in the shadows of the entrance lobby.

"Did I stutter?" she said. There was a hint of cruelty and bullying in her tone.

Henry stared at her, bewildered. "Da..da..." He calmed his muscles with a long inhale then continued. "Do we know each other?"

"Let's say, I know you. You're Liza's friend. I've seen you coming and going."

"How can I help you?"

"You can get in here before one of those new Keeper androids comes by," the voice ordered. There was gravel in her tone hinting at age.

Henry scurried through the door. The woman turned away from him before he could see her face, and she walked to the lift. Raising her right arm, she waved for him to follow her. Inside, she kept her head bent low and spoke, "Floor three hundred."

Henry stood with his back to the sidewall of the lift, staring wildly at the shiny black cape that hid its inhabitant. His curiosity begged him to talk to her, find out who she was, but a sense of obligation and urgency told him to ditch the stranger and head straight for Liza's apartment.

“You won’t get in.”

“Excuse me.”

“I know what you’re thinking, and you won’t get into her apartment without getting noticed. She is on the list now. All eyes are monitoring her and about ten thousand others who have been called.”

“Floor three-hundred,” came a voice in the lift announcing their arrival. The elevator gently stopped and the doors slid open.

“My flat is just over here. Best you follow me.”

Henry did as he was told. The woman’s flat was small, like most living quarters in the overcrowded city. The entirety of her home existed in two rooms, one for living, cooking and sleeping, combined with a ceiling to floor glass window facing south, and an adjacent toilet and washroom to the east.

The stranger continued inside, keeping her back to Henry. He stopped after passing through the entrance, unsure about following her any further.

“Hurry in here. My cloaking algorithm only lasts a few minutes before they notice the glitch.”

Henry snapped his head back in confusion. The door slid shut behind him. “Cloaking algorithm?” he asked.

She ignored his question. “Sit over there.”

The woman pointed a hidden finger, draped under an oversized sleeve, at the basic two-seater sofa sat against the west wall, next to the window. Opposite the couch were two wooden chairs with seats covered in a herringbone wool material and decorated with white crocheted doilies lain over the top of their back supports. Henry felt an overwhelming desire to touch the seat of the chairs. Real, organic material was so rare in the Sanctuary. He had heard of a few antiques that still existed from a time before everything was manufactured with 3D pico-printers. A time when objects were made from things grown and collected by hands. Back when animals and trees still existed on the planet. Antiques were a passion of his. But only through study. He rarely came across one in person, much less two in the same room.

“I said sit,” commanded the woman, breaking him from his temporary trance.

Henry sat immediately on the edge of the sofa, his body wound tight and ready to bounce up and run out of the flat at any moment.

The stranger shuffled over to her compact kitchen: one short countertop against the wall with a stove and sink. Like a picture framed, the designated area was delineated from the rest of the open-plan room by cabinets underneath the counter to the floor and open shelves reaching all the way to the ceiling overhead. The shelves and wall brackets burst with utensils, pots, pans, and dishware stacked and hung in an orderly manner. They had about them the appearance of many years collected and used but well taken care of.

With her back still to Henry, she peeled back her hood and released a fountain of wild, curly grey and silver hair that hung down to her shoulders. Henry almost let out an audible gasp. He had to force himself to sit quietly, gripping his knees to hold in his surprise.

An elderly woman? How is that possible?

The woman collected a tea kettle, filled it with water from the sink tap, and set it on the stove.

“That’s a start,” she said to herself. And set about removing two mugs from the shelf to her left. “I prefer the old-fashioned way. Kettle on the stove. Those food replicators never quite got it right. Everything tastes like metal from those damn things. But you understand, don’t you, Henry? That’s why you brew your own tea.”

Henry blinked before answering. “Ya...ya...yes. But how do you know so... so...so much about me?”

The woman turned to face her visitor. She looked even older than Henry had guessed. Her skin was dry, and the deep wrinkles around her face were well worn into the loose flesh that drooped downward as if she were a living melted candle. Her sea mist green eyes were the only part of her that hinted at a vibrant and still competent human.

“How has an old banger like me avoided Ascension?” she finished his thought. “That’s what you want to know, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“Why? What’s it to you?” She raised one eyebrow as the corner of her mouth

slid upward into a half-smile, pulling the sagging skin around her mouth and cheek along the way.

“I have a...a...a friend. I mean Liza.”

“Yes, I know. And you won’t be far behind your friend. Just one year before you’re called to Ascend. Unless, of course, they change the rules again.”

Henry had a sudden realization. An idea which sent his heart racing and hope soaring. “Can you help us? Help us avoid Ascension?”

“Why, Henry Ford.” She let out a loud crackling laugh. “That’s probably the most forward you’ve been your entire life.” The woman removed her cape and shuffled back towards the entrance, where she hung the limp cloth on a lonely naked hook.

A high-pitched whistle from the kettle ejaculated into the air, giving Henry a jolt. He half expected the alarm to wake him from this strange dream. But the smell of freshly brewed tea and old things, musty things, confirmed it was real. He couldn’t ever remember having scents in his dreams.

The old woman calmly made her way back to the Kettle and poured the steaming liquid into a teapot while continuing to talk. “Well, I guess it depends on what you mean by helping you?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I have no influence or means of helping you or Liza avoid Ascension. No, I’m very sorry about that.”

Lifting the tea mugs onto a tray along with a full teapot, she carried it over to the seating area. Upon suddenly noticing that she might need help, Henry jumped to his feet and insisted on taking the tray from her and placed it on the wooden coffee table sat between the sofa and chairs.

The old woman took a seat in one of the antique chairs. “I take mine white, darling.”

Henry poured.

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t help you with what comes after Ascension,” she said matter of fact.

Henry’s mouth dropped open, and his eyes swelled. Slowly, he lifted his face to meet her eye to eye. The hot tea continued to pour out of the pot, spilling over

the mug's lip and onto the tray.

CHAPTER THREE

“WELCOME, Ms Lee. My name is Hildra, and I’ll be your Arranger for Ascension.” said the woman appointed to help Liza plan the end of her life.

The Arranger was a lucky woman. She looked to be in her early twenties, meaning she wouldn’t be up for Ascension for quite some time, if ever. Her dark smooth skin was the perfect example of youth’s bounty: firm, hydrated, and wrinkle-free. A black halo of hair crowned her round cherub face and brown almond eyes. She wore a form-fitted grey uniform with the Dignity orange flame logo on the right chest, accentuating her firm breasts and a lean muscular body. Liza hated her already. Not for her beauty. Liza was not the jealous type. She hated her for the currency of her youth—the price of living she could now, never afford.

Liza inched into the private consultation room and stopped. The sparsely decorated suite felt impromptu and temporary. A single desk sat facing the door, behind which the human Arranger assigned to her Ascension case was still smiling at her. In front of the desk were three chairs, one facing Hildra and the other two tucked away over to the room's left side. The furniture was basic and minimalist, procured for its fast and straightforward production requirements. Ascension clinics had sprung up all around the Sanctuary within weeks of the program being announced. The sterile, nearly empty, white room reflected speed of deployment over-attention to detail.

At seeing Liza hesitate at the door, she waved towards the seat facing her desk. “Please come in, Liza. Can I call you Liza?”

Liza clutched her handbag tightly against her chest with both arms and cautiously walked over to the desk, slowly sitting down on the edge of a chair at a slight angle, as if she were riding a horse side-saddle (as if horses even existed anymore). Sitting all the way back into the chair would be wrong, she felt, conciliatory even. This wasn't a welcome visit, even if the Arranger had put on a wide, friendly smile and talked to her in a soft familiar voice. No, Liza would not make this easy for the Government. Sitting on the edge of her seat was her protest, her last act of resistance.

Hildra waved her hand over the black glass circle flush in the surface of her desk and a holographic screen beamed up and into the ether of the room. In the upper left corner of the screen was Liza's 3d image. Listed next to her photo was the standard bio-metric identification records of every Sanctuary citizen: genome sequencing, retinal scan, brain electroencephalogram, and voice imprint. Nobody was invisible. There was no off-grid in the Sanctuary.

Hildra's eyes shifted left to right as she scanned the data. Satisfied, she turned her focus to Liza. "Let me start by saying how proud we are that you have volunteered to Ascend on behalf of the safety and health of the Sanctuary and humanity itself. I know this must be difficult to take in." The words were robotic, rehearsed and well-tried.

Liza remained frozen; her brow pinched. Talking seemed absurd. She was here to listen.

The Arranger stared at her for a moment, took a deep breath and started over. The near eye roll hinted at tiredness, boredom, obligation. She had been here before. "How are you coping?"

A burst of unexpected laughter burst out of Liza. She could hear how demonic it sounded, and that gave her some pleasure. She hoped it sounded murderous, terrifying and out of control. However, Hildra just tilted her head sympathetically, unaffected. Liza's uncontrolled laughter suddenly seemed laughable and childish. This was not how she wanted the session to go. She was supposed to be in control. As her cheeks burned red, she let out one or two more short chuckles as if winding down and sat back in her chair.

Hildra gave her head a slight shake. "Ms Lee, I know this is hard. But you

have always understood the purpose of the Sanctuary. We are trying to save the last of humanity here. You have benefited from and contributed to twenty years of effort and innovation to rebuild life on the planet. It's easy at that time to forget what is at risk. To start feeling safe again. To start feeling the city has an obligation to you, rather than the other way around. If we don't operate on a zero-tolerance policy concerning a new epidemic, we are all at risk. Everything is at risk. There are no other options for any of us."

"Easy for you to say," snapped Liza. "You're not the one Ascending."

"We all die, Ms Lee. That's a fact of life. Would you rather suffer a horrible death by FossilFlu? Like your parents?"

Liza's face washed pale at the mention of her parents. Memories of sickness, fear, pain and abandonment crawled into her like a dense fog, suffocating her resistance. She suddenly felt helpless all over again, like a child lost in the wild.

The two women stared into each other's eyes as if competing to see who would blink first. A flash of light on the holographic screen indicated new data coming in. They both shifted their gaze simultaneously to a red flag that had appeared on Liza's registration form in the upper right corner.

"Well, that's interesting," said the Arranger. "Your record has just been updated. Seems you've had contact with the protestors since your visit to the clinic?" Hildra looked through the screen with a single raised eyebrow.

Liza's eyes grew wide. "What! That's ridiculous. She followed me to my car. I told her to go away. It was only minutes." Fear crept into her voice.

"Yes, I see that. But then you delayed this meeting for over twelve hours. I hope you see why we might have some concerns about your commitment to the Ascension program. Either way, it means we are dealing with a Red Form now."

Liza leaned forward, trying hard to read the holoscreen's reversed text. "What does that mean? A Red Form?"

With a stern look, Hildra silently invited Liza to sit back. Liza did as she was told.

"It means we now have limited options. You can go directly to the Oasis from the clinic today. There you will live one week of bliss before your Ascension. Within reason, you can have just about anything you desire while in

the Oasis. It's our way of saying thank you."

Liza stirred in her seat. "And option two?"

"Or you can be escorted to your home by the Keepers' units today, and they will remain with you, in your home, for three days, allowing you time to get any outstanding business in order. Then you will proceed to the Oasis."

Liza jumped to her feet. Hildra's hand moved quickly under her desk as if about to set off a remote alarm.

"Three days! You can't do this!" Liza screamed. "I have a life, people I need to see, things I want to do before my Ascension."

Hildra shot Liza an abhorrent look. "Ms Lee, we are not monsters. I am here to help you, not hurt you. Anyone you want to see will be allowed to visit you during the three days. We wouldn't dare think of stopping you from saying your goodbyes."

Liza huffed at the answer. "Right, and will they also then be 'Red Flagged' for having visited me?"

"Chances are, anyone you have been in contact with of a personal nature over the last twelve months is already under supervision. Until you Ascend, of course."

Liza let her shoulders drop in total resignation. What's the point anymore? She thought. This is only going in one direction. "What will it be like? The end?"

"You won't even know it is happening," Hildra offered a conciliatory grin.

Liza released a heavy sigh. "Tell me then, how do I end my life?"

Hildra nodded gratuitously. "As I said. We have two options..."

The Arranger proceeded down a list of End-of-Life Service options: free options, granted options to be gifted by loved ones, and paid selections. Liza listened numbly, saying nothing, allowing Hildra to read uninterrupted. The Arranger concluded her Ascension registration checklist.

"And finally," Hildra sat forward, excitement rising in her voice. "This is always my favourite part," she said giddily. "We have produced a digital epitaph of your life which will be permanently archived in the Sanctuary's official cenotaph." Hildra placed her hand into the screen, flicked her fingers to her

right, and sent the projection onto the wall. “Please, join me in celebrating the life of Liza Lee.”

The artificial lights overhead dimmed, and the holographic screen expanded itself until larger than life. A soft musical note lingered in the air, swelling into a movement of string instruments and then even larger until a full orchestral soundtrack introduced the title screen with the words: *Liza Lee, Born May 21st, 2121, Blissfully Ascended July 16th, 2161*. Liza stared at the wall with wide eyes, bewildered and confused. Then, the image of herself, no older than five, arriving at the Sanctuary’s orphanage, faded in from black.

Hildra sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. A smile slid upward on her face as she lifted her chin in pride, self-assured Liza would agree that the movie of her life was a success.

With mouth hung open, breath held, Liza watched her life’s story play out before her. Moments, her moments, her experiences that had been recorded by her virtual assistant had been edited by strangers into a montage of a person she barely recognized. Overlays and fades announced transitions from teen years to young adult to the outstanding citizen Liza had become. Beautiful pictures of Liza smiling, laughing, showing compassion by helping others, and working hard at helping build a life for the last of humanity in the Sanctuary played out. Absent were the dark moments, the scared and lonely moments, times when she cried herself to sleep thinking of her lost parents. Times when she wondered what life was really all about. This movie version of her life was always happy. She was almost jealous of the person on the screen. What a remarkable life that person lived, she thought. *I wish I could be her*.

The digital epitaph ended with a surge of patriotic music and a glowing still image of Liza looking upward, out across the Sanctuary’s glass and steel skyline, beaming with pride, a beacon of hope and self-sacrifice. This person loved the city more than herself. Hell, this person would have inspired her to sacrifice her life for the Sanctuary. Except Liza remembered that image, that very moment now staring back at her on the wall, and it wasn’t the Sanctuary she was thinking about. It was Henry. That was the moment she was walking home after their first night together. She wasn’t wondering what she could do to save humanity. No,

she was thinking of herself. She was thinking—for the first time in her life, she had something to live for. She was thinking of the future. How naïve she was. And how ironic this would be the picture they would choose to be the last moment of her life.

“We also have the option for your visitors to create their own storylines,” came an abrupt interruption in Hildra’s voice.

“Excuse me?” Liza said, slowly looking to the Arranger and wiping away a tiny bit of saliva that had filled the corner of her drawn mouth.

The lights came back up.

“None of us likes to admit it, Ms Lee, but not everyone you’ve encountered in your lifetime was satisfied with your relationship. This option, should you choose, allows the viewer to interact with their memories of you...and include a few minor changes. An unrequited love might finally hear you say the words ‘I love you,’ or an old friend might need to apologise for the guilt they had been harbouring and, in return, hear you forgive them.”

“But those are lies.”

“Is it, though? If the viewer believes it? I mean, it really can’t harm you at all, can it? And be certain, we do not allow downloading or rewriting of original data. These are temporary interventions. All records of the interaction will be erased. There is absolutely no risk whatsoever that your real-life would be confused or overwritten by a new storyline.”

“You want to turn my life into a game? Step right up and pick your own ending!”

“Some of our guests...” she paused. “The more compassionate ones”, she uttered low, under her breath as if Liza couldn’t hear her. “...they rather like this option. Like organ donations, they see it as their final gift to humanity. After all, what use are your memories to you after you’re gone?”

“Giving my bloody life is gift enough to this city. Let the survivors live with their guilt.”

“Of course, this is just an option.”

A sudden urge to get up and walk out shot through Liza, only hampered by the nagging question, *what will happen to Henry?*

“I’ll take the basic program,” Liza said hurriedly. “No frills, no gifted guest options. Just that silly movie thing if I have to, and one other option. I’d like my life files deleted from the archives—all of it. Everything ever recorded about me, either publicly in others’ feeds or by my virtual assistant. I want my experiences to be erased from history.”

Hildra sat back, her brow pinched in surprise. “Ms Lee. I’ve never...you understand the Government mandates that all lives are recorded and kept in the cities’ archives. A total delete is not possible.”

Liza sat forward and leaned in aggressively. “Then what are the options for being publicly forgotten?”

Hildra hesitated. “Well, there is one option for the insane or if you are a convicted criminal. We can mark your life file as *Sanctioned*. These lives are held in a separate database, firewalled, encrypted, and inaccessible. Are you really sure you want to be recorded in history with society's least desirables?”

A cynical smile stretched across Liza’s face. “What will it matter to me when I’m gone.” She threw the words back at the Arranger like a punch.

“Very well.” Hildra’s voice went crisp. “I’ll just mark your file clinically insane, as you like.”

“Very well,” Liza imitated her words in a contemptuous tone. “Now, where is the Keeper. I’m ready to go home.”

Hildra produced one last false smile, all teeth, no truth. She closed the holoscreen in front of her with a whisk of her hand. Her jaw muscles flexed, and her lips twitched, as most peoples did when using their subvocalization implant to talk to their virtual assistants. From behind Liza appeared a silver-haired, metallic Keeper’s android at the door.

Liza rose out of her chair and turned to leave the room without so much as a nod to Hildra. As she reached the door, she heard a loud sigh come from behind her. The exasperated tone of the Arranger’s heavy breath gave Liza a feeling of satisfaction. She may have lost the battle to save her life, but she won the last word. *Take that*, she said silently, and a thin smile lit up her face.

Back at Liza's apartment building, she hurried through the entrance lobby and hoped the lift would be clear of other residents as the silent Keeper android kept pace behind her. The thought of running into someone she knew and facing an overly sympathetic face with the inevitable, "I'm so sorry..." was more than she could bear. It had been less than forty-eight hours since she was the one offering condolences. The irony would have caused her to smile if the situation didn't end in her death.

The lift was empty. Inside, her virtual assistant spoke. "Hello, Liza. Floor ninety-nine?"

"Yes," Liza replied. Staring forward, she avoiding eye contact with the Keeper's android, who had tucked itself up against the wall to her right, within breathing distance if the thing could breathe. She had never been this close to one before. Most people kept their distance from the new android model. Their almost perfect human movement was a step too far for Liza. And nobody really understood why the Government had been building them secretly. This one hadn't said a word to Liza yet, and she was keen to keep it that way.

The lift purred upward and came to a gentle, almost imperceptible stop. Liza held her breath. The doors slid open to her floor. The corridor was clear. Hurrying down the hall, Liza ducked into her apartment quickly. The Keeper followed.

"Welcome home," said her assistant.

Liza ignored the customary greeting and turned, facing the Keeper.

"Stay here, by the door. I don't want you any further inside my home." Liza kept her eyes on its body, refusing to look directly into its steel blue glass eyes.

"Understood," the creature spoke to her for the first time. Its eerily human voice sent a chill down Liza's spine.

Inside, Liza looked around and had a strange sensation she was in someone else's house. She felt a voyeur about to be caught and sent away at any minute. *This isn't the time to have an identity crisis*, she scolded herself. She only had three days. She needed to get organized. Well, really, she didn't. However, there was no way she could survive three days if she felt things were out of order. *My closets*, she thought silently. *I'll start with my wardrobe and then move on to my*

storage.

Liza left the Keeper at the door and made her way back into the apartment's only bedroom. Deep into her wardrobe within minutes, two distinct piles rose from the ground: things for recycling and stuff for donation. Everything in the Sanctuary was recycled if not reused. She wore the clothes of others before her, and soon, someone new would be in her favourite white pull-over, unless she put it in the recycled materials pile, to be stripped back to its minerals and reconstituted into a new, more modern design. Liza caught herself staring at the two lumps of clothing. After a long sigh, she lifted everything in the donation pile and heaped them in with the recycles. *Fuck it. Burn it all. Erase Liza Lee.*

Suddenly a random thought pinched at her heart. Henry. In her haste to get busy, she had forgotten she needed to contact Henry.

“SIVA, are there any messages for me?”

“There are fifty-two messages unheard. All are from Henry. He spent the night sleeping outside the main entrance doors last night as well.”

Liza went stiff. Her eyes glazed over and her mind wandered into the most horrible of scenarios. She felt both fear and sadness for Henry at once. “God, how could I have not contacted him,” she whispered, horrified at the person, herself in this case, who could do such a thing to someone they loved. Someone they loved; the words repeated in her mind. She had never told Henry she loved him, not in those exact words, even though he confessed his love for her many times over. But yes, she did love him.

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. There was a brief anomaly in the network. When it cleared, Henry was no longer outside the building.”

“What do you mean anomaly? That can’t happen. The network never goes down.”

“I don’t have an answer for you, Liza.”

Liza’s hands began to involuntarily clench into white knuckles as panic tightened its grip on her throat. The words of her Arranger rang in her head: Red Flag file. Henry must have been tagged and collected by the Keepers. They were the only entity powerful enough to cause a black-out in the network.

“Oh god, oh my...” Liza started a quick pace back and forth in her bedroom, trying to figure out her next steps when suddenly SIVA spoke, giving Liza a start.

“Liza, you have a visitor. Henry is outside your door.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DOOR to Liza's flat slid open. Henry's bright blue eyes, crowned by his thick strawberry-blond eyebrows, instantly glazed over with pending tears. He dared not rush in, even though his body demanded it. Liza hadn't been expecting him. His arrival was an intrusion, a necessary intervention to win back her trust. And he now had a plan—a way to save them both. But she might not believe him or believe in him any longer. Maybe she wanted to be alone. Perhaps she wanted to sleep with more men before her pending Ascension. These thoughts haunted him.

Liza stood in her entrance staring at Henry. Words sat in the back of her tightening throat, unable to come out. She hadn't wanted to cry. Her plan was to be strong for him. After all, he was the one who would have to live without her. But fight as she may, emotion took over her will, and the tears poured out in trembling sobs. "I...I'm so...sorry," she stammered between jagged breaths.

Henry leapt forward and pulled her into his body, his arms wrapped around her in a ribbon tied tight. They both wept without words until they spent all their tears. Liza slowly calmed herself and caught up with her breathing. That's when she realized she could feel Henry's heart pounding against his chest. Poor Henry, what had she done to him?

Liza wiped her cheeks and stepped back so she could look him in the eyes. "I should have called you."

"Don't. Please don't apologize. I understand. I understand you like I've never understood anyone."

Liza let out a small, unexpected sigh which felt like letting air out of a balloon, a release into a more relaxed state.

Just then, a motion at the end of the entrance hall caught the corner of Henry's vision. Startled, he pulled Liza behind him. The silver Keeper stepped into the hall and stared at them, unspeaking.

"Henry! It's okay," Liza grabbed Henry's arm, holding him back. "It's been assigned to watch over me. In case I try to run or hide, I guess."

Henry's muscles remained coiled. For what he had no idea. He had never been in a physical fight with another human his entire life, much less a Keeper. He wouldn't even know how to attack one.

"Please continue your visitation in the apartment," the silver android asked in a near-perfect human voice. The apartment door slid shut behind them. It was not a request.

Liza stepped in front of Henry. "Let's do as it says. Please, don't cause any problems, Henry. It's too dangerous for you."

"Me? What about you? How long will it be staying here?"

"As long as I am here. Until my Ascension."

Henry's cheeks burned red with a sudden rage. "Ha...ha...ha," he stammered. "How long do we have?"

Liza's eyes fell to the ground. "Three days."

A palpable silence filled the gap between them as the reality of their situation settled in. After a few moments, Liza gently clasped his hand. "Come, let's go talk in the bedroom. We can be alone in there."

Henry allowed himself to be led into her flat, keeping a hard stare on the Keeper who remained at the end of the entrance hall, turning his back to the wall and standing guard.

As soon as Liza's bedroom door slid shut, she swung her arms around Henry's neck and pressed her lips against his. Henry met her approach with an open mouth, surprised. Liza had never been so explicit in her desire for him. Within seconds, he realized it was really happening. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. Perhaps she always did. But knowing it for certain made the moment feel like the first kiss all over again. He leaned into her, and their lips

moved flesh to flesh, breath to breath. Then all rhythm disappeared. A frenzy of lustful activity unravelled. Liza pulled at his coat, then his shirt, as he ripped her top off. They hopped on one foot as they hurriedly took their trousers off. Henry tripped as he pulled at his last pant leg, and he fell on top of Liza, forcing them both to collapse onto the bed. The mass of their bodies pressed together caused their skin to pulsate and tingle. Sensations amplified to a fever pitch. Liza's chest and groin rubbed and pressed into his gyrating body. Her back arched as he pulled her closer. Inside, they were one.

The act was quick. Faster than usual. They both found the end in a rapturous moment of release while squeezing the other in a near suffocating grip. But this was not the end. Henry remained inside, and they wrapped themselves into a ball like snakes entwined and lay together for over an hour, silent, awake.

"Do you trust me?" Henry finally spoke. His chin nestled on top of her head.

"Of course."

He felt her warm breath against his chest. "There is a way for us to be together. If that is what you want."

Liza shot up, leaning on her right arm. His eyes were begging. "What you are you talking about?"

Henry sat up. "Just hear me out. I met someone. A lady in your building. An elderly woman."

Liza crinkled her face in doubt. "There aren't any elderly people in this building anymore."

"That's what I thought."

"Henry Ford, what are you talking about?"

"We can't talk here. Let's take a shower."

Steam filled the glass cubical, barely large enough to fit two grown humans. Liza looked at him, naked. His ivory and pink skin, ruby red nipples and light brown freckles across his shoulders and upper chest radiated under the water. She had forgotten about her Ascension over the last few hours. But something of his skin, so alive and transparent, reminded her of what she was losing. A sadness set in.

Henry lifted her chin, locking in on her eyes. The sound of water jetting out

of the shower muted his voice from the outside world. “Did they tell you about the process of Ascension?”

“No, only that I won’t even know it is happening.”

“They will put you into a coma. During this time, the Ascension network will be copying your brain's entire structure down to the last DNA strand. All the billions of synapsis that create your memories, your feelings, everything that makes up your existence will be turned into code and run through a neural network.”

“Why would they do that?”

“It’s a new AI system they are working on. A program that will amalgamate all the life experiences and learnings of an entire generation. It’s a sort of living time capsule showing what it is to be human through the eyes of millions.”

Liza moved slightly away from him until her back was up against the glass wall. The words of the Arranger rang through her head, “*Your visitors can create their own storylines.*” A sudden fear overwhelmed her. Not only was her death out of her control, but now so was her eternal life. “They can’t. They can’t just take our lives like that.”

Henry placed his hands on her arms gently. “It might not be all that bad.”

Liza’s eyes ballooned. Who was this man talking to her? Where was the person appalled thinking about the mass suicide program? The person who fought the culling of the weak and old?

“If we are together. I mean. It might be worth it.”

“How do you know all this?”

“The old woman told me. She was one of the original programmers on the Ascension neural network. Before she was taken to Ascend herself, she secretly created a subroutine and buried it deep in the code, encrypted in a black box. That’s where she exists now. She is alive, Liza. And I’ve been in her mind. The apartment she took me to upstairs was real, as if everything inside existed, all of it. I smelt freshly brewed tea and touched organic materials. And there are others. People she has helped who have joined her.”

“Henry, that’s not living,” Liza's voice pleaded. “That’s a program, controlled and manipulated by someone else. It’s like being buried alive. I can’t

think of anything more terrifying.” She shook her head.

Henry stared at her with a conviction rare for him. “What other choice do we have. I can’t live without you.”

Liza met his confession with silence. She turned and stepped out of the shower. Grabbing a towel, she dried herself. Henry leaned up against the open glass door, staring at her.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” Liza said, her eyes avoiding him. She wrapped the towel around her breasts and tucked it tight so as not to fall off.

“How can you be so cold. I thought you loved me. I thought we loved each other?” he pleaded. Henry came up directly behind her, his naked damp body pressing into her back. He wrapped his arms around her waist. “I mean it. I’m not sticking around. We either ascend together, or I go anyways, right after you. I take my own life.”

Liza spun round. “Don’t say that!”

“Then you will do it? There’s no reason to wait.”

Liza pushed Henry back and made her way into her bedroom. Henry followed.

“What is stopping you, Liza?” Henry’s voice grew more and more exasperated, and his stammer returned. “Wa...wa...we can be together forever. Isn’t that what you want as well?”

Liza, half-dressed, turned at his stutter, feeling responsible. “I do want to be with you, Henry. I am with you. Right now, right here, we are together. Can’t we let this be enough?”

Henry’s enthusiasm drained from his face. His flesh went a pallid ghostly white. He fell back onto the edge of her bed, with shoulders slumped forward. Tears filled his eyes. Liza sat next to him in silence. After a few minutes, he lay his head on her shoulder.

“I love you,” he uttered in a voice so mournful, so profound, that tears came to her eyes.

Liza placed her hand on his lap and turned until they sat face to face. “Henry Ford,” she began with a gentle smile. “I love you too.”

And there it was. The words he so ached to hear from her since the day she walked into his shop. Received with a joyous rapture of relief and yet, he knew it wasn't real.

The lights came up in the private immersion room Henry had booked next to the Sanctuary's cenotaph for those who had ascended. The image of Liza and her apartment faded away as the door slid open. Henry's head hung low, and his eyes remained frozen on the ground. He couldn't bring himself to look around at the empty sterile chamber which held her image just seconds ago. If he tried hard, he could still smell her. Rose and cedar. Rare Earth scents. Simulation only, of course. As soon as she left his tea shop, he would lock the front doors and let the smell linger. Liza, his precious Liza. If they only had more time together, it could have happened; she might have said it.

The soft padding of feet moving in his direction announced his Dignity Arranger. The young female, dressed in a grey uniform adorned with an orange flame on her breast, walked in and stood before him. "Mr Ford, I hope that was helpful."

"She never said it, though, did she. Not in real life."

"The network is an accurate version of Liza, up until the end. She made the wish that you be able to add to her storyline. She wanted you to design your own ending. So, in a sense, through her actions, she did say it. And now it is time for you to join her. Isn't that what you both want?"

"Yes." He said in a voice so soft, so lost, that he could have been agreeing to anything. Henry stood to join her, but something had been bugging him. "Why did you change the storyline?"

"Excuse me?"

"There was an old woman in Liza's building in this version. That never happened in real life and I didn't request the change. Liza found me sitting on the ground by her entrance the morning she returned from the clinic. I never visited anyone else's apartment."

The Arranger tilted her head quizzically. “Wait, let me rerun the storyline.” She stared off into space as the re-enactment played privately across her bionic lens implant. Blinking twice, she finished the replay. “No, I’m sorry. I didn’t see any *old* woman in the re-enactment. Are you sure it wasn’t something you imagined?”

Henry rubbed his hand along his forehead. “Strange. She seemed so real.”

The Arranger pointed to the door with an upturned full hand. “Mr Ford, we must go to the Oasis now. Your Ascension awaits you.”

In only a thin blue paper-like gown, Henry climbed aboard the white plinth bed that stood in the middle of a glass chamber inside the Oasis. The walls were opaque white, hiding the thousands of other Sanctuary citizens Ascending in their own private Oasis rooms. He lay on his back, staring up at the featureless ceiling. Behind him, a holographic wall lit up with a 3D outline of his body and internal organs glowing green. A robot medical arm descended from one of the chamber's corners and hovered next to his left arm. A voice from overhead spoke. “Mr Ford, are you ready?”

Henry blinked one last time. “Ya...ya...yes,” he said.

The prick of the needle was cool and quick. Henry's mind slipped into a warm white light until nothing of the room was visible anymore. Slowly, the green illuminated organs of Henry Ford on the medical screen turned amber.

“Commencing brain scan and neural replication,” came the voice from the ceiling.

CHAPTER FIVE

A BLACK VOID UNFOLDED.

Henry?

Is that you, Liza?

Yes, it is.

I can't see anything. Where are you?

Do you trust me?

Always.

Follow my voice. I have something to show you. Something wonderful.

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